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ABSTRACT

The monograph emerged from experience with an independent learning program at the English Centre of the University of Hong Kong. Students enrolled in classroom-based English spend part of their study time improving their English in ways they have chosen themselves, with the support of self-access learning facilities and counselors. They were asked to reflect on their experiences and evaluate their progress. The report is presented in three parts. The first introduces the notion of autonomy and explores three relevant areas of the literature: learner beliefs about language learning; conceptions of learning; and Vygotskyan interpretations of self-direction and inner speech. A model for analyzing learner discourse on language learning in conceptual terms is offered. In part two, the model is applied to the data to analyze the conceptions of language and language learning collectively available to the learners in the study and their readiness for autonomous learning. The third part contains two case studies, in which these conceptions are related to readiness for autonomy within the discourse of individual students. Contains 57 references. (MSE)

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Making Sense of Autonomous Language Learning

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Making Sense of Autonomous Language Learning

Conceptions of Learning and Readiness for Autonomy

Phil Benson

and

Winnie Lor

English Centre Monograph, No. 2

1998

The University of Hong Kong

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Introduction

Autonomy is now recognised as a major goal within language education and numerous institutions are experimenting with innovative programmes designed to promote autonomous language learning. This research monograph arises from one such programme, called the Independent Learning Programme (ILP), in the English Centre at the University of Hong Kong. In this programme, students enrolled in classroom-based English courses spend part of their study time improving English in ways that they have chosen themselves with the support of self-access learning facilities and counsellors. They are asked to reflect upon and write about their experiences and are assessed on the basis of their own evaluations of their progress.

In the first year of the programme (1996-7), the English Centre was fortunate to receive a Run Run Shaw Teaching Development Grant, which allowed the authors of this report to work on the development and evaluation of the programme. In the course of that year, the authors of this report acted as participant observers in the programme in one Arts Faculty group of 16 students. One of the researchers (Phil Benson) taught the group while the other (Winnie Lor) attended classes, recorded classroom discussions, talked informally with students, and conducted formal recorded interviews with them. The data collected in the form of transcripts and written documents were then analysed collaboratively by the two researchers.

In the course of our research, which began without predefined research questions, two fundamental issues came to the fore: What conceptions of language and language learning do learners hold and how are these conceptions related to their readiness for autonomy? By conceptions of language and language learning we mean learners' overarching notions about the object and process of their learning: in this case, what learners think English *is* and what they think learning English *consists of*. By readiness for autonomy, we mean the learners' overall attitudes towards the idea and practice of autonomous learning. In other words, how do learners respond to the proposition that they can and should exercise autonomy in their learning? We feel that the best way to approach these questions is to listen to learners and to pay close attention to what they say. The greater part of this report is, therefore, devoted to an analysis of the learner discourse on language learning collected during the course of this project.

This monograph is divided into three parts. In Part One, we introduce the notion of autonomy and explore three relevant areas of the literature: learner beliefs about language learning, conceptions of learning and Vygotskyan interpretations of self-direction and inner speech. We conclude by introducing a model for analysing learner discourse on language learning in conceptual terms. In Part Two, we apply this model to our data in order to analyse the conceptions of language and language learning collectively available to the learners in our study and their relationship to readiness for autonomy. In Part Three, we present two case studies, in which we try to show how these conceptions are related to readiness for autonomy within the discourse of individual students.

The conclusions that we draw from this study are tentative and closely tied to the context of our data. One conclusion that we assert with some confidence is that the relationship between conceptions of the object and process of learning and readiness for autonomy that we hypothesise can be understood if we listen to and analyse learner discourse on language learning. Our research suggests, however, that the relationship is complex and cannot simply be defined in terms of the articulation of a particular set of beliefs or the possession of a particular set of cognitive resources. The resources that learners draw on in making sense of autonomy are conditioned by contexts in which they learn. Equally, the capacity to manipulate cognitive resources discursively appears to be as important as the possession of the resources themselves. Tentative as these conclusions are, we believe that they represent a step forward in our understanding of autonomy in language learning that will be productive for future research.

Part One

Analysing readiness for autonomous language learning

The data analysed in this report were collected in the course of a programme called the Independent Learning Programme (ILP), in which the notion of 'independence' is roughly equivalent to the notion of 'autonomy' as it is used in the wider literature. The ILP therefore aims to promote autonomy. The crux of autonomy is understood as student control over learning, which comprises active involvement in the learning process, responsibility for its content, control over factors such as the time, frequency, pace, settings and methods of learning, and critical awareness of purposes and goals. Student-controlled learning at all or some of these levels is described in the literature as autonomous (e.g., Little, 1991; Wenden, 1991; Dam, 1994; Dickinson & Wenden, 1995; Pemberton et al., 1996; Benson & Voller, 1997), self-directed (Candy, 1991; Hammond & Collins, 1991) or self-regulated (Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994).

Autonomy in language learning

Autonomy can be located at technical, psychological and political levels (Benson, 1997). At the technical level, it is concerned with management, strategies and techniques of learning. At the psychological level, it is concerned with the inner capacity for self-direction or self-regulation of learning. At the political level, it is concerned with control over situational contexts of learning. Approaches to the implementation of autonomy tend to vary according to their degree of emphasis on each of these levels and their inter-relationships. Although students may display autonomy at any or all of the levels, the levels are assumed here to be interdependent. In other words, fully autonomous learners would not only possess the technical and psychological capacities needed for self-direction, they would also have sufficient control over situational context of their learning to allow them to exercise these capacities to the full (Benson, 1996). Since these conditions are rarely realised in practice, autonomy is always constrained in some way or another by social and institutional contexts of learning.

Notions of autonomy, self-direction and self-regulation are by no means restricted to the literature on language learning. According to Boud (1988), autonomy can be seen as a goal common to all academic disciplines. Arguments for autonomy as a goal of university education derive, first, from the need for learning skills in a world where factual knowledge and content-bound skills rapidly fall out-of-date and, second, from the principle that academic expertise consists in the capacity to produce knowledge rather than simply reproduce what is already known. Some studies have shown that students do develop more autonomous modes of thinking and learning in the course of their university education. Perry's (1970) work, for example, showed that American students tended to move in the course of their university years from the belief that knowledge is simple, certain and handed down by authority to the view that knowledge is complex, reasoning-based and ambiguous. Boud and other researchers have shown, however, that such developments are likely to be in spite of the general trend of university teaching, not the result of it. Students themselves often perceive that university learning, teaching and

assessment procedures discourage rather than encourage autonomy (Ramsden, 1984).

Autonomy has become a prominent theme within language education in recent years. One reason for this is a growing recognition of the diversity of outcomes from foreign language learning. Students learning a foreign language are not necessarily learning the same thing, nor do they necessarily engage in the same processes of learning. As one student in this study puts it, a foreign language 'has no specified curriculum'. Where languages are learned in order to be used, there are no real boundaries to learning. Where they are learned in order to be used as a medium of learning, the boundaries of the language curriculum are largely relative to contexts defined by the daily life of the learners themselves. In many institutional settings, therefore, language teachers find themselves in the forefront of efforts to promote autonomy as a specific response to the demands of teaching their subject matter.

In the field of language education, three main strands of implementation of autonomy are reported: teaching learning skills and strategy training (e.g., Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Wenden, 1991; Dickinson, 1992), allowing students greater control over the content and style of classroom learning, especially through project work (e.g., Legutke & Thomas, 1991; Dam, 1994) and provision of self-access learning facilities (e.g., Little, 1989; Sheerin, 1989, 1991, 1997; Esch, 1994; Gardner & Miller, 1994; Sturtridge, 1997). Interventions to promote autonomy are therefore generally based on the assumption that students will become more autonomous (i) if they acquire skills and adopt practices associated with autonomous learning, and (ii) if they are given freedom in regard to content and methods of learning. The extent to which theorists and practitioners favour one kind of intervention over another tends to depend upon the degree to which they emphasise the different parts of this assumption.

Any intervention aiming to promote autonomy must begin with two basic questions: How autonomous are the learners already and what inner resources do they possess to help them become more autonomous? In learning strategy research, these questions are typically answered by having students report on their use of strategies through elicitation instruments such as the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990). They can also be answered by probing into learners' conceptions of language and language learning, their conceptions of the contexts in which they learn and their conceptions of their own capacities for learning. Such research focuses on the psychological level of autonomy and assumes that learning behaviours are conditioned by overarching conceptions of the object and process of learning. In this study we also assume that these conceptions are not independent, but constrained by the social and institutional contexts in which learning takes place. It is assumed that the psychological level of autonomy conditions the technical level and is in turn conditioned by constraints at the political level.

The main focus of this study thus falls upon learners' conceptions of language and language learning and their relationship to their readiness for autonomous learning in the context of our own programme, the ILP. We believe that the most effective way to analyse this relationship is through analysis of learner discourse about language learning and autonomy. In the following sections, we will review three areas of the literature that offer insights into this relationship: learner beliefs about language learning, conceptions of learning and Vygotskyan approaches to self-direction and inner speech.

Learner beliefs about language learning

The study of learner beliefs about language learning has been described by Riley (1997) as a "rather untidy area". In an early study, Wenden (1987: 103) observed that learner strategy research had hitherto focused on "what learners do or report doing to learn a second language" and that there had been little mention of "learners' reflections on the assumptions or beliefs underlying their choice of strategies". Wenden (1986: 186) also suggested that, in addition to what it had to say about strategies, research had "served to illustrate what learners know about their learning process - i.e., what they can bring to awareness and articulate during an interview, be it based completely on actual fact or largely inferred". In the first phase of her study, Wenden analysed transcripts of interviews with 25 adult ESL learners in the USA and identified five dimensions on which learners spoke about their language learning: (i) the language, (ii) their proficiency in the language, (iii) the outcome of their learning endeavours, (iv) their role in the language learning process and (v) how best to approach the task of language learning. In a subsequent phase of the study, Wenden (1987: 103) focused on the fifth of these dimensions, called 'explicit prescriptive beliefs', which were categorised according to the importance attached by learners to the factors listed in Figure 1.

Figure 1- Learners explicit beliefs about language learning (based on Wenden, 1987)

Use the language	Learn about the language	Personal factors are important
Learn the natural way	Learn grammar and vocabulary	The emotional aspect is important
Practice	Take a formal course	Self-concept can also facilitate or inhibit learning
Think in your second language	Learn from mistakes	Aptitude for learning is necessary
Live and study in an environment where the target language is spoken	Be mentally active	
Don't worry about mistakes		

Wenden observed that individual learners tended to adopt a preferred set of beliefs from one of the three major categories. She also observed that there was some relationship between beliefs on the one hand and

preferred strategies, what students attend to in learning, criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of activities and planning priorities on the other.

In other studies, elicitation instruments have been used to collect data on learner beliefs. Horwitz (1987, 1988) devised the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) consisting of 34 items derived from free-recall protocols of foreign language and ESL teachers and from student focus group discussions. Her questionnaire elicits degrees of agreement or disagreement with statements of belief in five areas: (i) difficulty of language learning, (ii) foreign language aptitude, (iii) the nature of language learning, (iv) learning and communication strategies, and (v) motivations and expectations. Like Horwitz, Cotterall (1995) administered a 34-item questionnaire to adult ESL learners developed from a series of interviews with ESL students. Cotterall used factor analysis to identify 6 underlying constructs of learner belief: (i) the role of the teacher, (ii) the role of feedback, (iii) learner independence, (iv) learner confidence in study ability, (v) experience of language learning, (vi) approach to study. Riley (1989, 1994) has also proposed an overarching framework for beliefs about language learning, consisting of four categories: (i) general beliefs, (ii) beliefs about self, (iii) beliefs about norms and rules, and (iv) beliefs about goals.

There are clearly a variety of ways in which beliefs can be categorised, which is understandable given that classification systems are derived directly from data of very different kinds. It is also clear that beliefs can be classified at three levels: (i) the topics that learners hold beliefs about, (ii) broad clusters of related beliefs, and (iii) discrete beliefs abstracted from data. Using Wenden's results in Figure 1 as our example, 'explicit beliefs about language learning' can be described as a topic that learners hold beliefs about, 'personal factors are important' can be described as a cluster of related beliefs and 'aptitude is necessary for learning' can be described as a discrete belief abstracted from data.

Researchers largely agree that beliefs underlie strategy choice and influence language learning behaviour. According to Horwitz (1988: 293), the point of knowing more about learner beliefs is that teachers may encounter "unanticipated beliefs, some enabling and some truly detrimental to successful language learning". Cotterall (1995: 195) also connects learner beliefs to readiness for autonomy:

> ...before interventions aimed at fostering autonomy are implemented, it is necessary to gauge learners' readiness for the changes in beliefs and behaviour which autonomy implies... Why should learner beliefs be so important in planning for autonomy? Simply because the beliefs and attitudes learners hold have a profound influence on their learning behaviour.

Horwitz and Cotterall assume that some beliefs are more conducive to effective language learning and autonomy than others. The problem is, however, to determine why certain beliefs are more enabling or disabling than others and in what sense this is a property of the beliefs themselves.

Research on learner beliefs about language learning has thus established the principle of a cognitive basis for the adoption of learning behaviours and has begun to establish methodologies for investigating and classifying beliefs. We are somewhat sceptical, however, of the assumption that beliefs are enabling or disabling in and of themselves and remain open to the possibility that different beliefs will work differently for different learners in different contexts. In the next section we will look at research in the field of educational psychology which offers a broader framework for the analysis of learner beliefs in terms of conceptions of learning.

Conceptions of learning

Research on students' conceptions of learning in the field of educational psychology arises from a tradition known as 'Student Approaches to Learning' (SAL). SAL defines itself as an alternative to the Information Processing (IP) approach, which proposes "a set of theoretical ideas about learning...which apply regardless of the context and content of learning" (Watkins, 1996: 4). In contrast, SAL theory is derived bottom up from the perspective of the learner and recognises the crucial importance of the context of learning and the content of the learning task. The emphasis on the learner's perspective is reflected in the programmatic view that "learning should be seen as a qualitative change in a person's way of seeing, experiencing, understanding, conceptualizing something in the real world" (Marton & Ramsden, 1988: 271) rather than as a purely quantitative addition to the learner's knowledge. SAL research is reviewed here, first, because the notion of conceptions of learning suggests the need for a further level of analysis in the study of learner beliefs on language learning and, second, because it offers some important insights into the relationship between beliefs and readiness for autonomy.

In an often cited experiment, Marton & Säljö (1976) asked students to read a passage and then interviewed them to find out what they had learned and how they had approached the task. Responses were coded into four categories of content of learning and two categories of processing: surface-level and deep-level. In surface-level processing, students direct attention towards "learning the text itself (*the sign*)" while in deep-level processing attention is directed towards "the intentional content of the learning material (*what is signified*)" (p.7). Using the same data, but focusing on learning outcomes, Svensson (1977) referred to 'atomistic' and 'holistic' cognitive approaches. The terms 'surface approach' and 'deep approach' have now become common in the literature and Biggs (1987) has added the notion of an 'achieving approach', in which students make use of surface and deep approaches as needed in order to achieve high grades.

Biggs (1987, 1992) has developed two questionnaire instruments to assess approaches to learning, the Learning Process Questionnaire (LPQ) for secondary level and the Student Process Questionnaire (SPQ) for tertiary level. Biggs (1993: 6) observes that the term 'approaches to learning' has come to have two different meanings: (i) "the processes adopted prior to, and which directly determine, the outcome of learning", studied by Marton & Säljö (1976), and (ii)

"predispositions to adopt particular processes", studied through instruments such as the LPQ and SPQ, which ask students how they usually go about learning. Biggs also observes that:

> A predisposition to this or that learning approach is the individual student's way of achieving balance in the system as perceived by the student. Given an individual's goals, self-perceptions as to ability, the mode of teaching and assessment, the outcome, and the student's attributions for that outcome, so the student will after exposure to a particular teaching/learning environment find a certain approach to be viable and personally comfortable in day-to-day coping with that environment, and thus be predisposed to use deep or surface strategies for particular tasks in that context. (p.10)

Biggs observes that approaches to learning are essentially compromises made within specific contexts of learning. This observation is especially relevant to this study because, as we will see, the students interviewed are highly aware of context in reporting their views on language learning.

SAL research also provides some evidence that a predisposition to deep, holistic approaches to learning will be more conducive to autonomous learning than a predisposition towards surface, atomistic approaches. In a study of correlations between perceptions of school environment and approaches to learning among Australian students in the final year of secondary school, for example, Ramsden, Martin & Bowden (1989: 129) found that:

> School environments offering supportive teaching, coherent structure, emphasis on autonomy and moderate stress on achievement are associated with learning involving an active search for understanding, organised study methods and avoidance of superficial approaches.

From a different angle, Watkins (1996: 15) also makes a correlation between autonomy and deep approaches to learning. Comparing results of SAL questionnaire studies from various countries, he hypothesises:

> ...for students to want to adopt a deep-level approach to learning requires confidence in their own academic ability, and a belief that they should not rely too much on the teacher but accept responsibility for their own learning.

Correlations of factors of approach and 'locus of control' from 17 studies conducted in 8 different countries confirm that "there is a trend for more superficial approaches to learning to be associated with an external locus of control" (p. 15). This suggests that students who are predisposed to deep approaches to learning are also likely to be predisposed to more autonomous modes of learning.

Surface and deep approaches designate learning behaviours or predispositions towards learning behaviours. In recent research, Marton and his associates have shifted their focus of attention to the description of 'conceptions of learning' (Marton, Dall'Alba & Beaty,

1993) using a methodology they call phenomenography (Marton, 1981; Säljö, 1988). Phenomenography aims to investigate the ways in which people construe or conceive of phenomena and is based on the assumption that subjective interpretations of reality are more important in analysing actions than any underlying objective reality. According to Marton (1981: 180), phenomenography does not necessarily require that we make phenomenological assumptions about the nature of reality, merely that we focus attention on the 'second order perspective' of the ways in which people experience reality rather than on the 'first order perspective' of the reality itself. Säljö (1988: 42) places phenomenography within the tradition of qualitative research:

The concrete praxis of phenomenography implies that the variation in forms of talking about phenomena is reduced to a limited set of categories (usually between three and five) that depicts significant differences in ways of construing this phenomenon. The assumption is that conceptions of reality can be expressed in a large number of linguistic forms without necessarily changing the basic way in which the phenomenon is construed.

In order to investigate conceptions of phenomena, subjects are interviewed to probe the ways in which they understand them. Transcripts are read repeatedly until categories begin to emerge following a methodology similar to that used in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The transcripts are coded and theory is developed on the basis of interrelationships between categories identified. Typically, the categories and their interrelationships are the outcome of the research. Phenomenography also makes two key assumptions:

1. Conceptions do not reside within individuals. Although people tend to use particular conceptions of reality in certain settings or in relation to certain problems, they cannot be assumed always to hold these conceptions.
2. "Conceptions are conceived as *relational* phenomena rather than as inherent qualities in the mind of the thinker or in the objects/phenomena themselves" (Säljö, 1988: 44).

Individual interviewees may therefore express fragments of more than one conception, and the conceptions they express will not necessarily be consistent over time. The objective of phenomenographic research is, however, not so much to understand individuals in terms of the conceptions they hold, as to understand the nature of the conceptions themselves.

Much of the work in the field of conceptions of learning has been concerned with conceptions of scientific theories, but Marton and others have recently turned their attention to conceptions of learning itself (Marton, Dall'Alba & Beaty, 1993; Marton, Dall'Alba & Tse, 1996; Marton, Watkins & Tang, 1997; Purdie, Hattie & Douglas, 1996). Summarising conclusions from earlier studies, Marton, Watkins & Tang (1997) refer to six distinct conceptions of learning:

A. as an increase in knowledge

B. as memorising

C. as acquiring facts, procedures, etc. which can be retained and utilised in practice

D. as the abstraction of meaning (understanding)

E. as an interpretative process aimed at the understanding of reality (seeing something in a different way)

F. as a change in the person

These six conceptions are assumed to be hierarchically ordered in relation to approaches to learning. A, B and C are described as quantitative and are associated with surface approaches. D, E and F are described as qualitative and are associated with deep approaches. Watkins (1996: 6) makes a strong claim for this relationship, stating that:

> ...there is clear evidence that conception, approach, and outcome are linked by a chain of functional relationships. It seems that students who are only capable of conceiving a quantitative conception of learning only achieve a surface approach to learning, and that awareness of a qualitative conception of learning is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for the adoption of a deep-level approach.

If autonomy is associated with deep approaches to learning, then it may also be associated with conceptions of learning as understanding, seeing things in different ways and personal change.

In a recent work, Marton and his associates have refined this model of six conceptions of learning in two important ways. First, Marton, Dall'Alba & Tse (1996) and Marton, Watkins & Tang (1997) have observed that the distinction between memorising (B) and understanding (D) is not necessarily oppositional for Chinese learners who rather make a distinction between rote learning (memorising words) and memorising in order to understand (memorising meaning). On the basis of interviews with Hong Kong secondary school students, Marton Watkins & Tang (1997) have come up with a matrix based on the distinction between the temporal dimension of learning and a dimension of depth (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The outcome space of learning (from Marton, Watkins & Tang, 1997)

way of experiencing learning	temporal facet		
	acquiring	**knowing**	**making use of**
committing to memory (words)	memorising (words)	remembering (words)	reproducing (words)
committing to memory (meaning)	memorising (meaning)	remembering (meaning)	reproducing (meaning)
understanding (meaning)	gaining understanding (meaning)	having understanding (meaning)	being able to do something being able to do something differently being able to do something different
understanding (phenomenon)	gaining understanding (phenomenon)	having understanding (phenomenon)	relating

The distinctions between ways of experiencing learning represented in this matrix are based on distinctions related to the subject, act and object of learning. In relation to the subject of learning the important distinction is whether the teacher or student is the agent of learning. Ways of experiencing learning involving understanding are student-based by definition. In relation to the act of learning the important distinction is between the intention to commit to memory and the intention to understand. The difference between memorising (meaning) and understanding (meaning) is therefore a difference of emphasis (understanding in order to remember or understanding for its own sake). Lastly, the important distinctions in relation to the object of learning are between the words of the text (the sign) and the meaning of the text (the signified) and between the meaning of the text and meaning of the phenomenon with which it is concerned. Each of the four ways of experiencing learning can also be characterised in terms of 'acquiring', 'knowing' and 'making use of' phases. The authors note that this two-dimensional model is very different from the model of six conceptions of learning proposed in earlier work and that conceptions of learning as seeing things in different ways (E) and personal change (F) are both "beyond the deep end of the second and third temporal facets as characterised in the present investigation" (p.41). Despite these differences, the important distinction between quantitative (committing signs to memory) and qualitative (understanding the meaning of signs) conceptions of learning remains intact, together with their association with surface and deep approaches.

SAL research offers a number of insights for the analysis of learner beliefs about language learning and their relation to readiness for autonomy. Research into learner beliefs involves three analytical phases: abstraction of beliefs from learner discourse, clustering of

related beliefs and identification of topics about which beliefs are held. SAL research suggests that beliefs may also be organised hierarchically in terms of predispositions towards surface and deep approaches and thus associated with readiness for autonomy. Phenomenographic research on conceptions of learning suggests a further level of analysis at which the ways in which learners construe the object and process of learning are addressed. In relation to language learning, the key conceptual questions are: What kind of object do learners think the language they are learning *is*, what do they think the process of learning consists of and who do they identify as the principal agents in learning. The distinction made between conceptions and beliefs here is, therefore, a distinction between what learners believe a phenomenon to be (e.g., what English is) and what they believe to be true about it (e.g., that it is difficult to learn).

We hypothesise that beliefs and approaches to language learning are largely conditioned by overarching conceptions of the object and process of learning and that these conceptions can be inferred from learner discourse on language learning. Like more general conceptions of learning, conceptions of language learning can be described as quantitative or qualitative and, as we will see in Part Two of this study, these tend to be supported by quantitative and qualitative conceptions of language itself.

Conceptions of language and language learning are therefore central to our approach to learner beliefs. We are less convinced, however, of the assumption implicit in phenomenographic methodology (and apparently shared by researchers on learner beliefs) that "conceptions of reality can be expressed in a large number of linguistic forms without necessarily changing the basic way in which the phenomenon is construed" (Säljö, 1988: 42). In contrast to much current language theory, this assumption implies a transparent relationship between discourse and thought and ignores the important function of discourse as action. It may also lead us to ignore the ways in which discourse functions as a mechanism by which conceptions of learning condition or constrain learning behaviours. Particular conceptions of language and language learning, like particular beliefs, may work differently for different students in different contexts. The ways in which conceptions are put to work in discourse may therefore be as important as the conceptions themselves in regard to readiness for autonomy. In the next section, we will turn to Vygotskian theory, which offers some insights into relationships between discourse and autonomy through the notion of inner speech.

Self-direction and inner speech

Constructivist approaches to learning theory tend to regard all successful learning as autonomous by definition, since learning is conceptualised as something that only the learner can do. Moreover, according to Paris & Byrnes (1989: 169):

> As children acquire progressively refined concepts of their academic learning, they integrate this information into an emerging theory of self-regulated learning that becomes a functional guide for their own performance.

The process of learning is thus also a process of learning how to learn in the course of which the learner becomes progressively more autonomous. The capacity for self-regulation or autonomy is seen as being common to all learners and takes the form of theories of learning that guide learning behaviour. The notion of overarching conceptions of learning which condition learning behaviour and the idea that higher conceptions are associated with autonomy are therefore compatible with constructivist assumptions about the nature of learning.

Within the constructivist tradition, Vygotskyan approaches are especially interesting from the point of view of the role of discourse in learning and the development of autonomy. In brief, Vygotskyan theory holds that language is constitutive of both external social processes and internal cognitive processes and that the development of the higher mental processes derives from the internalisation of external communicative speech. According to Vygotsky (1978: 86), this development takes place within the 'zone of proximal development', defined as:

> ...the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

In this process of guidance or collaboration, the learner learns by internalising meanings acquired through linguistic interaction. The directive communicative speech of others is transformed into self-directive inner speech, which derives from communicative speech but differs from it in being unconstrained by grammatical structure. According to Rohrkemper (1989: 145-6):

> After repeated exposure to word meanings by *other persons* in their social/instructional environments, children subsequently become able to expose *themselves* to word meanings and thereby direct their own behaviour.... The developmental sequence of the two functions of language, communication with others and self-direction, is from social or *inter*personal to self-directive or *intra*personal. The implications of this progression are critical. Not only does language acquire two distinct functions, but the source of self-directive inner speech is the social environment.

From a Vygotskyan perspective, self-direction is a function of inner speech. Understood here as the key internal mechanism of autonomous learning, self-direction is thus both socially and linguistically mediated.

A Vygotskyan interpretation of the role of language in self-direction has a number of implications for our understanding of learner beliefs or conceptions of learning and their relation to autonomy. First, we understand autonomous learning to be a process in which the learners take most of the significant decisions about learning themselves. However, the Vygotskyan notion of learning as the internalisation of meanings acquired through social interaction suggests that autonomy is ultimately the product of guidance and collaboration. Readiness for autonomy may thus be understood as a matter of the learner's capacity to transform external communicative speech into inner self-directive speech. Equally, it would appear to be wrong to equate readiness for autonomy with readiness to learn *without* external guidance or collaboration with other learners. Readiness for autonomy would seem, rather, with the capacity to internalise guidance as inner speech.

We are aware of conceptual and methodological difficulties in the relationship between external and internal processes in psychology (see, for example, Wertsch & Stone, 1985) and of the danger of mistaking what students say about their learning for self-directive inner speech itself. Nevertheless we believe that Vygotskyan theory points to the need for a research agenda on learner beliefs and conceptions of learning which takes account of the ways in which these beliefs and conceptions are represented and manipulated in talk. In particular, it suggests that we should take care not to assume that conceptions represented in talk are a transparent reflection of thought. Learner talk may rather be conceptualised as a form of action in which beliefs and concepts figure as discursive objects in the process of learning. In other words, learner discourse on language learning should be understood not simply as a transparent representation of beliefs about the learning process but as a part of the learning process itself. Specifically, it may be understood as part of a process in which conceptions and beliefs interact and are transformed into usable theories of learning.

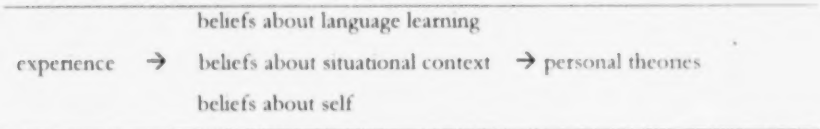
Analysing learners' talk about language learning

The aim of this study is to understand how learners' conceptions of language learning are related to their readiness for autonomy in the context of the ILP. Although we embarked upon data collection and analysis without predefined research questions, it rapidly became clear that readiness for autonomy was an important variable in the effectiveness of the programme for individual students. Some students were clearly favourably disposed towards autonomous learning in the sense that they thought it was a good way to learn and that they were capable of learning autonomously themselves. Other students were less favourably disposed towards autonomous learning, an attitude that often took the form of confusion about what the ILP required of them and a feeling that, although autonomous learning may be good for others, it was not good for them. The research question that arose from this observation was whether analysis of learner discourse on language learning in the context of the programme could help us to understand what the readiness for autonomy of certain students consists of.

The three areas of the literature discussed so far contribute to the analytical framework for investigating this question in different ways. From all three areas, we draw the assumption that learner beliefs, conceptions and discourse on language learning condition learning behaviours. From the literature on learner beliefs about language learning (especially Wenden, 1986, 1987), we have drawn the principle of abstracting beliefs about language learning from spoken and written data and the classificatory hierarchy of topic of talk, clusters of beliefs, and discrete beliefs. From the SAL literature, we draw the notions of deep and surface approaches and quantitative and qualitative conceptions of learning and their relation to autonomous learning. From Vygotskyan theory, we draw an emphasis on the need to address the function of learner discourse in self-direction.

In Parts Two and Three of this report, we adopt two distinct approaches to the description and analysis of learner discourse. In Part Two, we analyse explicit statements about language learning in terms of a range of beliefs and conceptions available to the learners in this study collectively. We also explore relationships between this range of beliefs and readiness for autonomy. In Part Three, we present case studies of two students, in which we attempt to show how this range of beliefs and conceptions is operationalised in the discourse of individual students. Both of these approaches are informed by the framework for analysing learner talk about language learning proposed in Figure 3.

Figure 3 - A framework for analysing learner discourse about language learning



We have observed that, when students talk about language learning, they do a number of different things. First, they select **experiences** that are reported as narratives relevant to the ongoing discourse. These narrative accounts of experience typically lead to or illustrate generalisations that we characterise as **beliefs**. Learner beliefs, as we use the term, consist of explicit general statements about language learning that learners hold to be true. It is also important to note here that the term 'belief' here refers not to what learners actually believe (to which we have no direct access), but only to what they say they believe (to which we have access through their discourse). In categorising these beliefs topically, we find it helpful to distinguish three types: **beliefs about language learning** (concerned with principles and methods), **beliefs about situational context** (concerned with the social and institutional contexts of learning), and **beliefs about self** (concerned with the learners themselves). Beliefs about language learning correspond to Wenden's (1986) categories of talk about the language and how best to approach the task of language learning. Beliefs about situational context broadly correspond to Wenden's category of talk about the outcomes of learning endeavours, while beliefs about self correspond to her categories of talk about the learner's own proficiency and role in the language learning process.

Talk corresponding to each of these categories can be identified both topically and by certain linguistic and discursive signals, notably by reference and personal pronoun choice. In our data, beliefs about language learning tend to be signalled by impersonal second person and first person plural pronouns, for example:

> "If you really pay effort, you can learn something."
>
> "Whenever we decide to learn a language, we must put in effort."

Beliefs about situational context tend to be signalled by a combination of pronouns and named third person referents, for example,

> "In my opinion, I think English use in this university is less than in secondary school. English in secondary school is one of the important subjects. We will sit for the examination for the English and you must practise more English, but in the university there is no examination pressure. So we will use English less than in secondary school."

Beliefs about self tend to be signalled by first person pronouns only, for example:

> "Even if my English is an A, still mine is Hong Kong English. I still cannot be like those people. So I become very sensitive. That's the kind of English I want."

As these examples from our data show, selection of pronouns also corresponds to the speaker's focus of attention: beliefs about language learning are concerned with what the speaker believes to be true of language learning in general, beliefs about situational context are concerned with the speaker's relationship to others in social and

institutional contexts, and beliefs about self are concerned with the speaker's self-evaluations.

The three analytical categories that we propose are therefore understood both as ways of thinking and as ways of talking about language learning. When students talk at length, we have also observed that the three dimensions of talk tend to be interwoven, and we characterise beliefs arising from the interaction of talk from different categories as **personal theories** of language learning. Personal theories of language learning correspond to beliefs about language learning but differ from them in that they are contextualised within the learner's beliefs about situational context and self and are therefore highly usable. We assume, however, that within a productive process of autonomous learning, personal theories are subsequently validated against experience and ultimately re-emerge as new generalised beliefs. Beliefs are therefore seen as inherently unstable. Those that we observe in our data are assumed to be the products of early processes of theory building and the starting point for new ones. The analytical model that we propose is therefore designed to capture elements of learner beliefs about the learning process as they appear in discourse. An interview transcript or written text is not seen as a representation of the learner's fixed beliefs, but as a snapshot of a moment in a continuous process of development.

A further level of analysis that we propose concerns conceptions of language and language learning. As we use the terms here, conceptions differ from the beliefs in that they are not necessarily signalled by explicit statements of what the learners believe to be true. They take the form of implicit assumptions about the nature of the object and process of learning. In phenomenographic research, subjects are encouraged to express conceptions of phenomena directly. This was not the case in our research. Nevertheless, conceptions of language learning can be inferred from the explicit expression of beliefs. In the analysis we make a broad distinction between quantitative and qualitative conceptions of language and language learning across the three dimensions of belief identified.

In the following sections, we will describe the context in which our data were collected and the procedures used.

The Independent Learning Programme

The data analysed in this report were collected from students participating in a programme called the Independent Learning Programme (ILP) during the 1996-7 academic year. The English Centre at the University of Hong Kong attempts to promote autonomy in two main ways: (i) through classroom-based courses built around projects, and (ii) through provision of self-access facilities supported by a consultation service and regular workshops. The ILP integrates these two strands by building an out-of-class component into classroom-based courses. The ILP is currently part of three courses for approximately 1000 first-year students in the Faculties of Arts, Social Sciences and Economics, where it accounts for up to 20% of the total course grade. In these courses, students attend a two-hour class each week for 24 weeks and a further minimum of 12 hours is allocated to out-of-class work. The ILP runs for around 16 weeks of the course in parallel to classroom sessions.

In the year in which this study was carried out, students were first introduced to the ILP by their class teacher and through a handout explaining the principles, stages and requirements of the programme. They were also taken on an orientation visit to the University's self-access centre early in the course. Students then elected to attend a workshop on one of ten topics: academic writing, conversation and discussion, English with computers, English through film, grammar, oral presentation, pronunciation, resumes and interviews, vocabulary, or writing at work. Workshops were organised according to demand and run by self-access consultants in the self-access centre. The aim of these workshops was twofold: (i) to introduce students to ways of organising short programmes of self-directed study for their selected topic, and (ii) to give students a chance to form small study groups across classroom and faculty divides. Following the workshop, students were expected to plan and carry out their programme of study over a period of approximately 12 weeks, in which they chose either to work in the self-access centre or outside, and to work individually, in pairs or in small groups. During this period, they were able to call on self-access consultants in the self-access centre or on their class teacher for support. In many cases, class teachers held further sessions in which students reported on their progress. Towards the end of the programme a second series of workshops was held, in which students shared what they had been doing and the self-access consultant helped them prepare for assessment. The form of assessment was left to the class teacher or in some cases to the students themselves. In most cases it took the form of a short reflective report on their activities and progress.

We do not claim that the ILP as it has been described here is necessarily the best model for promoting autonomous language learning (for another model with similar aims, see Karlsson, et al., 1997). Nevertheless, we believe that integrating out-of-class work with classroom work and providing students with maximum freedom of choice in conjunction with support in the form of classroom teaching and self-access consultation are sound principles for promoting autonomy in language learning.

Data and methodology

The data analysed in this report were collected by the authors, who acted as participant observers in one Arts Faculty group of 16 students participating in the ILP. One of the researchers taught the group while the other one attended classes, recorded relevant classroom discussions, talked informally with students, and conducted formal recorded interviews with them. The two students whose case studies appear in Part Three of this monograph were also interviewed during the first semester of their second year of University, when they were no longer obliged to take English classes. In addition, the researchers also talked to other teachers and students involved in the ILP, and conducted, observed and recorded ILP workshops.

The database for this report consists of the researchers' observation and interview notes, and transcripts of discussions and interviews with students. Interviews were conducted and transcribed in Cantonese and then translated into English using a method designed to preserve as far as possible the lexical distinctions and discursive structure of the original talk. Approximately 200 project reports written by students at the end of the programme were also included in the database. The data is stored in the form of computer text files and has been coded and analysed with the help of *Nud.ist*, a computer programme designed for qualitative data analysis.

The data were coded and analysed in different ways for Parts Two and Three of the report. Firstly, the various documents were read systematically and coded according to the occurrence of instances of talk related to the conceptual, situational and affective dimensions of knowledge discussed in the previous section. Instances of talk corresponding to each dimension were then recoded to generate the categories introduced in Part Two. For the case studies presented in Part Three, all of the data related to the subjects were reread and annotated following a procedure called 'meaning condensation' in which text is summarised and thematised to express the speakers' viewpoint as the researchers understand it (Kvale, 1996: 193). In both cases, the data were first coded independently by the two researchers, who then reached a consensus on the final coding.

Part Two

Learner beliefs, conceptions of language learning and readiness for autonomy

In Part Two of this monograph, we describe the range of beliefs expressed by the learners who are the subjects of this study using the analytical framework outlined in Part One. Beliefs are categorised as beliefs about language learning, beliefs about situational context and beliefs about self. Within each of these categories, clusters of related beliefs are identified. These beliefs are represented by brief statements abstracted from their expression in the data and are illustrated by citations. Beliefs within each of the three main categories are organised hierarchically according to their relationships to conceptions of language and language learning. They are then related to readiness for autonomy indirectly through these conceptions.

We assume that beliefs and conceptions do not reside within individuals. Although individual learners may tend to adopt certain beliefs or conceptions in certain situations, they cannot be assumed to hold these beliefs and conceptions always and in all situations. The purpose of describing the beliefs and conceptions held within a group is, therefore, to delimit the range of beliefs and conceptions available to the group as a collectivity. It is assumed that beliefs and conceptions within this range are available to individuals within the group collectively through interaction and collaboration. For this reason, in this part of the study, we do not attempt to associate beliefs and conceptions with individuals and extracts from the data are not attributed to individual learners. In Part Three, however, we present two case studies, which do attempt to show how the beliefs and conceptions identified interact within the discourse of individual learners.

Beliefs about language learning

Beliefs about language learning correspond to the category Wenden (1986) calls 'explicit prescriptive beliefs'. When learners talk about these beliefs, they are essentially talking about what it takes to be able to learn a language effectively. This type of talk is generally signalled by the use of impersonal second person and first person plural pronouns. Beliefs about language learning, as we use the term here, cover what learners believe to be true independently of their knowledge of the situational context of learning and of themselves as learners. Nevertheless, we assume that by expressing beliefs about the best ways to learn languages learners assert their relevance to beliefs about situational context or self.

In categorising beliefs about language learning, we use a two level hierarchy. The top level consists of three elements that emerge as being especially important within our data: work, method and motivation. The second level consists of specific beliefs about these elements expressed in the form of short statements abstracted from the data. Each of these statements is illustrated by one or two citations.

Work

Students refer to three major components of work in language learning: effort, practice and time.

You have to put in effort

> "If you really pay effort, you can learn something."
>
> "Whenever we decide to learn a language, we must put in effort."

You have to practice

"Practice makes perfect."

> "Frequent practice and application of language is also very essential for us to master it."

You have to be patient

> "Fishing also requires time, which is the same in learning language as your language will be better if you devote more time."

Each of these elements shares the characteristic of being both quantifiable and readily available to all. The belief that language learning requires work is, therefore, equivalent to the proposition that success in learning a language depends on the relative expenditure of a substance available to all.

Method

In contrast to beliefs that focus on the importance of work, beliefs that focus on method are concerned with the conditions under which work will be successful.

You need a teacher

> "I think it is necessary to have a person check you to see if you have learned anything or made any mistake."
>
> "Hmm, usually I think the best method is to do more exercises. When you have finished, somebody will explain it to you."

You have to build a good foundation

> "When we decide to learn, we should devote time to construct our foundations, like having clear concepts of grammar, word patterns, etc. During the learning process, we have to collect, absorb and assimilate all the knowledge we get too."

You need to pay attention to all aspects of the language

> "When we learn a foreign language, different linguistic items such as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar should be paid heed to."
>
> "When learning a language, I think I should consider several aspects. They are reading, writing, listening and speaking. I cannot ignore one of them. Otherwise, there is an absence of one face for a box."

You have to identify your needs

> "English is a language which has no specified curriculum and therefore it is difficult to learn it well within class... [Self-study] provides chances for us to keep in touch with the language even outside class."
>
> "You understand best your own level, what you need, if you self-learn, self-search."

You have to pay attention to language use

> "Studying language, it's based on your attention in your daily living. It's a kind of sense. If you've got that kind of sense, no matter who speaks a sentence, or if you notice any word you don't know in the street, you will take the initiative in learning it."

You have to expose yourself to the language

> "I think English, especially language, is very difficult with no formula to improve. You need to read more, listen more, contact more.... I don't deliberately do it"
>
> "My view on learning English is not deliberately to take a course to study it. Simply like reading the newspaper, watching movies, the feeling is better, more comfortable."

In general, the learners in our study do not propose method as an alternative to work. Rather, method is seen as a way of making work more effective. However, different beliefs about method imply different kinds of work. For example, the belief that you need a teacher in order to learn implies 'exercises' and work that can be 'corrected', while the belief that you need to expose yourself to the language implies work such as 'reading more' and 'watching movies'. Beliefs about method thus range along a cline from explicit to implicit learning and from other-direction to self-direction.

Motivation

Motivation is also concerned with the conditions under which work will be successful, and specifically for the learners in this study, with factors that will enable them to remain on task.

You need to be pushed to learn by a teacher

> "Many students are like that. If you don't force them to do something, they won't do it."
>
> "If you have a tutor threaten me, I will do it."

You need to be in an environment that forces you to use the language

> "There's no specified way to learn. It's natural to hand in homework if you study. You need to read books if you need to hand in homework, digest it and write it. Or you need to present. In fact in this process, we really have learnt English."
>
> "You must be forced to learn. In fact I think it's necessary. So many things are forced to happen. For example, a child, if you

> make him go abroad, he must speak in English. If you don't, nobody understands you. If you are forced to speak, you will know how to speak. But here [at the University of Hong Kong], it is not a must. That's why the effect isn't good"

You need to be self-motivated

> "About self-study, I think it's vitally important for everyone learning, especially learning language. ... Self-study means we have to access the materials actively and to motivate ourselves to learn and practise."
>
> "The teacher should not always give many things. We should find them ourselves."

You need to gain a sense of satisfaction from learning

> "I feel that if you can master a language, you can speak very fluently. That kind of sense of success is wonderful, extended high."
>
> "Perhaps it's vanity. I feel that because English is very important, and always, if your English is good, you will really feel a sense of satisfaction, a sense of vanity. That's why I quite like English."

You need to follow your own interests

> "If I can follow my interest to learn, I don't think it's a burden. It's something we learn naturally, unconsciously."
>
> "I think there should be more interesting things. In fact if a person has interest in a thing he will put effort in it."

Like method, motivation is largely seen as a means of making work more effective and again we see an implicit difference between the kinds of work that arise from being 'forced' to learn by a teacher and those that arise from the learner's own interest.

A pattern of beliefs

The overall pattern that emerges from our data is that the learners in this study tend to share an awareness of the importance of work, method and motivation in language learning and that their beliefs about method and motivation tend to be influenced by an overriding belief in the importance of work. The meaning of this pattern can be clarified if we compare it to the pattern of beliefs recorded in Wenden's (1987) study.

Wenden's (1987) categorisation of learners' explicit beliefs about the best way of learning a language comprised three major categories: 'use the language', 'learn about the language' and 'personal factors are important' (see Figure 1). Comparing these to our own categories of 'work', 'method' and 'motivation', we see, first, that Wenden has no category corresponding to our first category, 'work', although she includes 'practice' within the category 'use the language'. This may well reflect a difference between the students in the two studies. The overriding belief in the importance of work as a factor in language learning in our data fits the view expressed elsewhere in the literature

that Hong Kong learners tend to associate success in learning with effort (for a review, see Salili, 1996). This emphasis may be adaptive in an environment where social and economic advancement are closely related to academic achievement, and in a second language medium system where language learning is a key component of academic success.

Our second category, 'method', appears to embrace two of Wenden's categories, 'learn about the language' and 'use the language', both of which are concerned with the application of effort in particular directions. 'Learning about the language' corresponds in our own data to learning with a teacher, building a good foundation and paying attention to all aspects of the language. 'Use the language' corresponds to identifying one's own needs, paying attention to language in use and exposing oneself to the target language. Strikingly absent from our own data, however, are the specific methods that Wenden's interviewees propose such as thinking in the target language or learning from mistakes. When learners talk about methods in our data, they appear to be thinking of the conditions under which effort is likely to result in success rather than specific strategies or techniques.

Our third category, 'motivation', corresponds closely to Wenden's category, 'personal factors are important'. However, there is again an important difference in that the three beliefs listed by Wenden ('the emotional aspect is important', 'self-concept can also facilitate or inhibit learning', 'aptitude for learning is necessary') designate factors that would, if absent, militate against effort resulting in success. For example, learners who lack aptitude for language learning are unlikely to achieve a high level of success however hard they work. In our data, however, the motivational factors mentioned are principally encouragements to the learner to maintain a high level of effort. If the students in our data regard emotional involvement, self-concept or aptitude as important factors in language learning, they did not mention it in our data. One reason for this may be that in a context of learning where language learning is so closely connected to academic and socio-economic achievement, a concern with factors inherent to the individual would likely be maladaptive.

The comparison between our categories and those of Wenden strengthens our view that the students in our study strongly associate success in language learning with work, not only explicitly but also in their statements about method and motivation. Different classification schemas suggest that configurations of categories and elements within categories are specific to particular groups of learners. Although the beliefs expressed by learners in this study are drawn from a set of beliefs that are no doubt universal, it appears that the range of beliefs available to them is rather narrowly delimited by the context of their learning.

Conceptions of language learning and readiness for autonomy

The relationship between the beliefs about language learning expressed by students in this study and their readiness for autonomy is clearly complex. We have observed that Marton et al. (1993) identified six distinct conceptions of learning: (A) increasing one's knowledge, (B) memorising and reproducing, (C) applying, (D) understanding, (E) seeing something in a different way, (F) changing as a person. Conceptions A to C were described as quantitative, while conceptions D to F were described as qualitative. Marton et al.'s (1997) refinement of this schema identified four ways of experiencing learning among Hong Kong secondary students: (1) committing (words) to memory, (2) committing (meaning) to memory, (3) understanding (meaning) and (4) understanding (phenomena). Conceptions associated with memorisation were described as quantitative while conceptions associated with understanding were described as qualitative. Evidence for a relationship between qualitative conceptions of learning and readiness for autonomy was also noted.

Looking at the category of beliefs associated with method, the first three items - 'you need to work with a teacher', 'you need to build a good foundation' and 'you need to pay attention to all aspects of the language' - appear to be associated with a conception of language as a collection of 'things'. This conception is implicit in the notion that one's language can be 'checked', that one can 'build a foundation' in it and that one can identify and separate it into component parts such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. The last three items in this category - 'you have to pay attention to your needs', 'you have to pay attention to language use' and 'you have to expose yourself to the language' - seem to imply a conception of language as an 'environment' to which the learner intuitively responds. In the data extracts we have quoted, this conception is marked by statements such as 'English is a language which has no specified curriculum', 'studying language…is a kind of sense', and there is 'no formula to improve'.

If language is conceived of as a collection of things, it seems likely that the learner will favour methods of learning that are oriented towards the explicit accumulation of knowledge about it. In metaphorical terms, the learner is likely to approach learning as if it were a matter of collecting or accumulating the items in a set. If language is conceived of as an environment, it seems more likely that the learner will favour more implicit learning methods that emphasise understanding the language in use and understanding phenomena through the language.

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative conceptions of language learning thus applies to the object of learning as well as the process. In our data, the object of learning (language) is conceived of as a collection of things (quantitative) or as an environment (qualitative). The process of language learning is conceived of as a process of accumulation (quantitative) or as a process of exposure (qualitative) and as a process in which the pieces of language are passed to the learner by teachers (quantitative) or as a process in which the learner comes to terms with the unfamiliarity of the language environment with or without the aid of teachers (qualitative). We are therefore able to associate beliefs about the best way to learn a

language with conceptions of language and language learning through analysis of the metaphorical representation of the object and process of language learning within the expression of the beliefs themselves. We may also assume that expressions of belief based on qualitative conceptions indicate greater readiness for autonomy than those based on quantitative conceptions.

The relationship between conceptions of language learning and readiness for autonomy becomes more complex, however, when we consider that apparently contradictory conceptions may coexist within a group of learners and even, as we will see in Part Three of this monograph, within individual learners at the same moment in time. Since we have argued that the conceptions of learning held within a group are potentially available to all members of the group through interaction, learners may move from one type of conception to another through processes of dialogue and collaboration. They may also adopt new conceptions without necessarily abandoning the old ones.

From a Vygotskyan perspective, readiness for autonomy might be defined as a readiness to internalise meanings available within the group as a whole rather than the possession of meanings that are judged *a priori* to be favourable to autonomous learning. The kind of interaction that may be productive is illustrated by a fragment from a recorded class discussion in which two students discuss the value of watching videotaped movies for language learning (original in English):

> J: Um, but watching, watching tapes is just like watching, but is just like, quite entertainment.
>
> C: Do you think we can learn different things from entertainment?
>
> J: Yes, yes, but it's quite strange to me and er
>
> C: Do you like to see western films?
>
> J: Well of course. But I'm afraid I'll learn nothing from it because I, I enjoy watching too much.

In this extract, J expresses his scepticism about the value of an activity based on a qualitative conception of learning because it is evidently incompatible with his quantitative conception of what learning a language involves. However, the fact that he is prepared to discuss the activity with C, who has suggested that it is a good way of learning, is significant and may indicate his readiness to shift towards a more qualitative conception of learning. His willingness to engage in dialogue may therefore be a stronger indicator of his readiness for autonomy than the beliefs and conceptions that he expresses in the course of the discussion.

We have also observed that within our data there is an overriding concern with work as a factor in language learning and that motivation is interpreted as encouragement to maintain effort. Intuitively, we might wish to identify this emphasis on work with a quantitative conception of language learning. However, four of the five motivational factors identified as important are associated with

conceptions of learning as understanding - 'you need to be in an environment that forces you to use the language', 'you need to be self-motivated', 'you need to gain a sense of self-satisfaction from learning' and 'you need to follow your own interests'. In effect, it appears that an emphasis on work is also adaptive in relation to readiness for autonomy. As learners shift towards more qualitative conceptions of language learning they do not necessarily abandon the emphasis on effort that we have argued is adaptive in the context of learning English in Hong Kong.

Beliefs about situational context

We suggested that the range of beliefs about language learning available to a group of learners is constrained by the situational context of learning. Situational context is considered here as a dimension of learner belief, expressed in statements about relationships between self and others in specific social and institutional contexts. Talk about situational context is signalled linguistically by a combination of pronouns and named third person referents. It is assumed that the situational context of learning for a group of learners is represented by those aspects of situation that learners bring up themselves and by their own interpretations of them. As in the previous section, our aim is to model this context by identifying the range of relevant situations and what is said about them. We will focus on three areas: the social context of learning, the institutional context and prior experiences of learning.

The social context

In Hong Kong, learning English is a matter of daily discussion in the media, and students are surrounded by a public discourse on language which stresses the importance of English to Hong Kong as an 'international city' and the 'falling standard' of English among university graduates. Throughout our interview data, students report that English is 'important', but surprisingly few references are made to the importance of English in the broader social context. Two students make reference to the social context in stating the importance of English to themselves:

> "... because English seems to be an international language, I think that, er... how to say? There seems to be er some pressure. That is, it seems that you must learn it well, you should learn it well..."

> "Basically, it's impossible not knowing English. If your English is good, you will, er, er, be like more multi-talented. No matter what career you are going to pursue, it may be helpful."

Other students, however, comment that English is becoming less important in Hong Kong:

> "...speaking for myself, English is very important, but the outside world doesn't see English as being as high as before. Because of 1997, learning Chinese and Putonghua is more important and English is secondary to us.... Learning English is necessary at least to be able to manage the most basic things

> such as writing, speaking, which doesn't mean you must be very fluent but at least able to listen and to speak."
>
> "I just think that '97 is approaching. English is not the most important one. Putonghua may be more important."

In both of these quotations, the societal context is seen in terms of the competing linguistic demands of Putonghua and English. Both students see English as being less important than Putonghua. In the first quotation, the student contrasts the importance of English to her personally with its declining importance to Hong Kong in general. She also evaluates the relative importance of the two languages in terms of the proficiency that society expects. In her view, the level of this expectation in regard to English is lower than the level she believes she already has.

The institutional context

Most Hong Kong students begin university having received more than 2000 hours of instruction in English language over a period up to 13 years. The overwhelming majority receive no school instruction in any other foreign language. In order to enter the University of Hong Kong, students will normally have gained Grade D or above in the Advanced Level Examination in Use of English, a level which only 50-60 per cent of the examinees achieve. Although students are examined at the end of their first-year university English course, their overall perception of the university context is that they have been relieved of the pressure of having to perform well in English language in order to succeed. These considerations inform much of the talk about the relative importance of English in the two main institutional contexts to which students in our data refer: secondary school and university.

Many of the students interviewed during this study state that English is less important in university than it was in secondary school, for example:

> "In my opinion, I think English use in this university is less than in secondary school. English in secondary school is one of the important subjects. We will sit for the examination for the English and you must practise more English, but in the university there is no examination pressure. So we will use English less than in secondary school."

At the same time, students who have attended English-medium secondary schools where spoken English communication was not strictly enforced tend to say that they have more contact with English at university. A minority, who attended schools where spoken English was more strictly enforced, report that they have less contact with English at university. There is, therefore, a good deal of variation in the ways in which first year University of Hong Kong students perceive the role and importance of English in the university. There are, however, two related areas in which there is a considerable degree of agreement. We discuss these under the headings of 'the declining rate of return on effort' and 'English as a burden'.

The declining rate of return on effort. A number of students in our study articulately express the view that, having spent so many years learning English and having reached a certain degree of proficiency, further improvement will be difficult for them. For example:

> "But it's like a curve. At first, you might like it very very much but then later, if too much you may not like it. Bear with me if I put it this way. So many years, more than ten years of learning English, if some more, I can't stand it."

> "Surely it's useful. But I myself think that as long as my English is a C, I think it's enough. I just think that after paying so much, the gain is only from a C to B, yes, B is much better, but I think it isn't worth it."

In these two interview extracts, the students express the idea that they have reached saturation point with English study. The feeling of a declining rate of return on effort interacts in the second quotation with the perception noted in the previous section that university students have already achieved a socially acceptable standard of proficiency (the student is referring here to a grade C in the A-level Use of English examination, which would comfortably allow admission into the Arts Faculty of the University of Hong Kong).

English as a burden. A number of interviewees also express the view that continued formal study of English is 'a burden'. In the following extracts, 'EAS' refers to the first-year Arts Faculty English course, of which the ILP is a part:

> "Erm, in fact, many people think that EAS, erm, many people don't understand why we, with our English standard, say Arts Faculty, of which the basic requirement is D7, why we still have EAS that kind of course to improve our English. Many people think that EAS just asks them to do something. But apart from EAS, they still have other subjects, their homework, their test. So, it's heavy."

> "Although you can say we can learn something, I feel that it [EAS] creates additional burden to us. The whole university uses English as an instruction medium. After all, it can force the students to use English. So, that's why EAS is not necessary."

Again, in the first extract, the view that English is a burden interacts with the idea that the students have already met social expectations for English proficiency

A concern of almost all the students interviewed was the feeling of not having enough time for English:

> "I think we have too many subjects and we don't really have too much time for me to do this project [ILP]."

Many first-year Arts Faculty students take the opportunity to learn another foreign language such as Japanese, French or Swedish. For these students, English may be in competition with the new language and the feeling of a declining return on effort for English may contrast

with a feeling of rapid progress in the new language. One student interviewed in her second year (when English is no longer compulsory) reported that she had given up active study of English in favour of Japanese.

Beliefs about the situational context of learning among these first-year Arts students would seem to conspire against their readiness for autonomous learning of English. They believe that social and institutional expectations of English proficiency are lower than the proficiency that they believe that they already have. They also believe that they have reached a stage in learning English where the return on effort does not justify the effort expended. These conceptions contribute to the feeling that continued study of English is a burden. However, as we will see later in this section, these largely negative influences (from the point of view of improving proficiency in English) may interact differently with different conceptions of language learning and in ways that are not necessarily unfavourable to the promotion of autonomous learning.

Prior learning experiences

Whether students are able to report experiences that they judge to be experiences of autonomous learning or not would appear to be a significant factor in their readiness for autonomy. The assumption that the secondary school experience does not prepare students well for autonomous learning is common among university teachers. This assumption is also supported by some of the students in our study. The following statement was recorded during a classroom discussion, in which students were asked what they thought independent learning means (original in English):

> "To be honest, I haven't any independent experience and don't actually know the definition of independent learning. So (smiles) I can't tell. I'm sorry."

Statements of this kind are unusual in our data, however, and in the same discussion thirteen of the sixteen reported that they did have some experience of independent learning. In similar discussions conducted subsequently with students in other groups of first year undergraduates similar proportions were observed. Irrespective of the general pattern of secondary school learning, therefore, many first-year Hong Kong University students do have some awareness of what autonomous learning is before they arrive at university and they are able to report experiences of it. These reports can be divided into reports of experiences of autonomous learning in the classroom and reports of out-of-class learning.

Independent learning in the classroom. In the course of the discussion on experiences of independent learning referred to above a number of students recounted experiences within the context of classroom learning. In one group of four students, the following were recorded (original in English):

> "In secondary school, I have this experience and my English teacher asked us to learn English independently. She divided us

> into several groups and asked to us to um to do something about English outside. We decided on the programme ourselves and our group decided that we would watch some English TV programmes and then and then we performed a drama... I think the reaction was quite good. Our classmates were quite er, er, they thought er our performance was quite good."
>
> "...they want us to do some study and they also divide us into several groups and we choose our topics and then find, then find something to er to organise some experience, or ... or to find some experience and then er after finding out all the things about the topic, we will present them to the class."
>
> "I don't know if my example is independent learning or not. In my Economics class, er, er, we had a group doing a research about er a certain shopping centre in Ma On Shan and we predicted which shops will close down or improve, and its market structure such as how the doctors do their business. Say, if they charge the same price and we think about that what is the market structure. Such practice, I don't know if it is independent learning or not. So, ... in my English lesson, I don't feel that there are any activities, activities involving independent learning."

Many of the classroom-based experiences of independent learning reported involve project work. The general pattern is that the teacher sets a task with options for topic and method of execution and with the option of activities outside school. There is also usually some process of report-back involved. In other words, the experiences of independent learning reported tend to be teacher initiated and of limited duration. Students who reported such experiences also tended to evaluate them positively and were able to offer definitions of independent learning based upon them.

Classroom-based experiences of independent learning were more frequently reported than out-of-class experiences or experiences which had no relation to school learning. This may be a result of a tendency to interpret 'learning' as 'being taught'. For example, in the following exchange between the researcher and a student, the student interprets a question about her own learning efforts as a question about teaching styles:

> Q: Did you, while still in secondary school, do something to improve your English?
>
> A: In the past, my teachers usually erm, like this kind of mode, no. But they encouraged us to read English newspapers, listen to news on English TV channels. But usually we did something like assignments which were supposed to be submitted back to the teachers.

It seems as if this student has difficulty in discussing learning independently of the requirements of the school system as they are mediated through the advice and direction of teachers.

Independent learning outside the classroom. When asked to report experiences of independent learning, students tended not to report out-of-class experiences, although they were generally able to do so when prompted. This may have been an artefact of the situation in which they were asked (a classroom discussion), which caused them to focus on learning English in the classroom. In the discussion on independent learning referred to above, two students did, when prompted by the teacher, report that they had learned skills for summer jobs independently and that the methods they had used included observation of others and asking for help when difficulties arose. A number of students reported use of out-of-class activities for learning English, especially reading newspapers or watching television and video. Exceptionally, students reported more complex out-of-class activities in interviews:

> "... I myself like watching films, if not films, I'd watch Pearl [TV] programmes. I like to listen to their English and see if I understand it or not. Or the word I don't understand, I'd check the dictionary. Like, 'moo', what's 'moo'? I'd then look it up. If I could find the word, I'd be very happy because it's after my hard work. I would remember that word better. And learning English is that, if I find some vocabulary, I'd ask myself, 'how come I don't know this word?' (laughs) Then I would look it up, especially if this is a word I've seen so many times before. After looking it up, I would try to memorise it. Even if it's too long and I forgot it again, I could still recognise it. I keep a lot of books [for vocabulary]. Sometimes when I clean my house, I find that I've kept so many. And I'd wonder if it's necessary to throw away some of them. I think, if I don't know the words, I can just look them up. But I don't know why. I just feel that it's better to write them down."

Another student reported that as a matter of principle, she preferred out-of-class learning to in-class learning:

> "Because I don't like people pushing me. I don't like following a schedule. I think erm, learning English, Chinese, languages, there's no specified way to learn. It's natural to hand in homework if you study. You need to read books if you need to hand in homework, digesting it and writing it. Or you need to present. In fact in this process, we really have learnt English. It isn't really reading books, listening to the radio, reading newspaper. Not, not like a formula."

These extracts illustrate two ways conceptualising out-of-class learning, which can be described as 'strategy-based' and 'naturalistic', respectively.

Beliefs about situational context and readiness for autonomy

On the surface, much of what we have reported on beliefs about the situational context of learning would seem to discourage autonomous learning. Significant aspects of context, especially beliefs about social expectations in regard to English and about the stage of learning they have reached, may lead to low motivation for continued improvement in English. Since autonomy implies motivation, we may assume that these beliefs about the situational context are a barrier to autonomy for these students. However, the issue becomes more complex when beliefs about situational context are related to the beliefs about language learning discussed earlier.

The belief that increased effort will yield a declining return in learning English interacts with the prevalent belief that work is the most important factor in language learning. If students believe that work is the most important element in learning a language, but experience a declining rate of return on their efforts, they are likely to become demoralised about the prospect of further improvement. This sense of demoralisation results from a lack of congruence between beliefs about language learning and beliefs about situational context. One response to this lack of congruence may be for students to minimise the importance of English and legitimate its lack of importance through the belief that social expectations of English proficiency are lower than the proficiency they already have.

The notion that English is a burden is also related to a quantitative conception of English as a collection of things, however. Learners who adopt quantitative conceptions of language learning may be particularly prone to the sense of demoralisation that arises from the feeling of a declining return on effort, which is itself based on a quantitative metaphor. One response to this sense of demoralisation may be for learners to shift away from effort-based, quantitative conceptions of language learning towards exposure-based, qualitative conceptions. In other words, the belief that English should not be learned 'deliberately' may be a strategic response to a conception of the situational context as one in which increased effort will yield declining returns. We have argued that readiness for autonomy may lie in the readiness to shift from quantitative to qualitative conceptions of learning. This discussion of beliefs about situational context suggests that it may also lie in the learner's readiness to adapt conceptions of language and language learning to conceptions of the contexts in which they operate.

Beliefs about self

Beliefs about self expressed in our data tend to revolve around the learner's own proficiency and role in the language learning process. They are largely evaluative and, in our data, cover four dimensions: the learners' proficiency or 'standard of English', their self-confidence, their capacity to learn English, and their capacity for learning English autonomously. On each dimension, learners tend to evaluate themselves either positively or negatively and in quantitative or qualitative terms.

Proficiency

The term 'standard of English' is commonly used in Hong Kong to refer both to individual proficiency and to a more general societal proficiency (which is popularly held to be 'declining'). One effect of this usage may be seen in the different ways in which students evaluate their own 'standard of English'. Throughout our data, students tend to evaluate their own standards of English in terms of two types of norms, which closely correspond to quantitative and qualitative conceptions of learning.

Self-evaluation of English proficiency in quantitative terms involves the conception that there is a large amount to be learned, of which the learner has learned only a certain proportion:

> "Erm, for general communication purpose, it's okay. But I think there's a lot to learn in English. It's not only for simple communication. So many things that you may not know. That's why I suggest learning more new things. Knowing how to speak, so many other people know how to speak. But there's a lot to learn."

> "I know my English isn't good. I think that the reason my English is not good is not simply because I myself do not pay much effort to learn better English, but because my foundation isn't good at all. I think you can teach things like pronunciation."

These two extracts illustrate two different quantitative conceptions of proficiency in English. In the first extract, the learner evaluates his proficiency positively in relation to an external norm (general communication) but negatively in relation to the total quantity of things that are there to be learned. In the second extract, the learner evaluates her proficiency negatively because she judges that her 'foundation' is not good. She seems to feel that something in her English is missing.

Self-evaluation of proficiency in qualitative terms typically involves the identification of a standard of comparison or measurement:

> "Even if my English is an A, still mine is Hong Kong English. I still cannot be like those people. So I become very sensitive. That's the kind of English I want."

> "In fact, basically, I think [my English is] alright. Erm, I think it's okay for coping with the EAS course. But if you say for other English courses that I'm taking, it's probably hard to say."

In the first extract, the learner first refers to the norm of the Hong Kong examination system ('even if my English is an A') and then to the speech of an American-born Chinese actress whose English she admires. Her proficiency is evaluated as adequate in relation to the first norm, but inadequate in relation to the second. In the second extract, the learner refers first to the requirements of her university English language course and then to the requirements of courses in English literature and linguistics that she is taking. The proficiency of other English speakers and the proficiency required for objective needs (including examinations and the demands of English-medium study) are the typical norms against which proficiency is measured.

Self-confidence

Evaluations of self-confidence tend to be separate from evaluations of proficiency in our data and they are typically expressed in positive or negative terms:

> "I would read, but those books had lots of vocabulary. Not understanding them was no good. I was so upset and lost my confidence."

> "As for speaking, I seldom find that I am unable to express myself. Usually while speaking, either with the foreign teachers, oral, not much problem. And I don't know, comparatively my oral spoken English, I could switch [from Cantonese] much more quickly. That is I could say it, not very, but switching quite quickly."

The first extract illustrates a negative self-evaluation of the learner's self-confidence based on a quantitative conception of the learning process. The learner lost her confidence because the books contained 'lots of vocabulary'. The second extract illustrates a more positive self-evaluation based on a qualitative conception of the learning process. The learner expresses confidence in her spoken English because she evaluates it in terms of her ability to come to terms with an environment in which English is being used.

Capacity to learn English

In our data, learners' evaluations of their capacity to learn English are closely related to the notion of declining return on effort discussed earlier. In the following extracts, this conception underlies negative self-evaluations of the learner's capacity to learn:

> "I just think that it's at a stop now. I cannot absorb anything. In the past, I absorbed everything."

> "The things that I can gain at this stage are not many. Therefore my interest in learning English isn't very much."

As we noted earlier, the belief that increased effort will yield a declining return is based on a quantitative conception of the learning process. In the following extract, however, the learner displays her capacity to learn English by watching films through a description of how she does so.

> "I didn't do it on purpose, what to be done on which day. If accidentally there is such a movie shown on Pearl and think I want to watch, then I will watch it. While watching it I will deliberately listen to it first and then glance at the subtitles, guessing the meaning."

In this case the capacity to learn is presented as a capacity to create new learning situations. This form of self-evaluation is based on a qualitative conception of the learning process, in which learning is seen as an adaptation to new environmental needs and opportunities.

Capacity for independent learning

In our data, students also evaluate their capacity to learn autonomously:

> "I myself prefer more freedom, and don't like people to force me. The more you force me, the more I don't like to do it. I myself like learning things. I myself if I have time, I will do it. The reason I don't do it is because I don't have time. As for myself, I myself think that I prefer freedom. That will be good enough. Maybe some classmates want to have people teach them, or more structured. I think they want to have it [EAS] like a class."

> "Because of being an adult, a university student, doing anything should come from one's own initiative. Even without this ILP project, if I have an interest in something or to learn something, er, it's not related to the existence of the ILP project."

In both of these extracts the students express both a preference for autonomous learning and confidence in their capacity for it. In the following extracts dispreference for autonomous learning and a lack of confidence in the capacity for it are expressed:

> "Erm, in fact, if , or maybe people need some external force to push them so that they can do something. For me, it's true of me. For learning, I think, there should be some external things. Like the ILP, you are asked to hand in report, or to talk about the progress. Anyway, you need to hand in something to some people. Perhaps, for me, I can learn something. If you ask me to take initiative, self-learning, I don't think I can do it ... I don't know whether or not other people like being pushed."

> "Without a person to teach me, I don't know it, and don't know what's good. ... I don't even know from which page I should start. And I don't have the interest."

In cases of both positive and negative evaluation of the capacity for autonomous learning, the crucial issue seems to be preference for the mode of direction. If students prefer not to be 'pushed', they appear to evaluate their capacity to learn autonomously in a positive way. Students who prefer to be pushed, tend to evaluate their capacity for autonomous learning more negatively. This is not surprising since self-direction is central to autonomy. It is of interest, however, that in the extracts cited above, preference for autonomy is associated with a tendency to talk about language learning in qualitative terms, while dispreference for autonomy is associated with talk about language learning in quantitative terms.

Beliefs about self and readiness for autonomy

We have characterised beliefs about self in terms of self-evaluations on dimensions of proficiency, self-confidence, capacity for learning and capacity for autonomous learning. We have observed that on each dimension, self-evaluations may be made in quantitative or qualitative terms. Evidently, learners evaluate themselves as learners according to their conceptions of the nature of the learning process and of the object learned. Positive self-evaluations enhance motivation and should, therefore, be an indicator of readiness for autonomy. However, whether self-evaluation is positive or not may itself be a function of the conception of language learning on which it is based.

Referring back to the discussion of proficiency, quantitative self-evaluation implies a conception of language learning as the accumulation of things to be learned. The motivational target is the desire to know more, and both of the students cited in illustration of quantitative self-evaluation of proficiency refer to the importance of learning 'more things'. Qualitative self-evaluation of proficiency implies conceptions of language learning as understanding the language or as a means of doing something with it. The motivational target is expressed in terms of the gap between the stage that the learner has reached and one that is yet to be achieved. If the prevalent conception of the situational context of learning is one in which additional effort is seen to yield declining returns, we may hypothesise that students who use quantitative modes of evaluation are more likely to evaluate themselves negatively than those who use qualitative modes. Underlying different beliefs about self, therefore, are different conceptions of what it means to be a language learner. Readiness for autonomy may be indicated less by the particular mode of self-evaluation adopted than by a readiness to adapt to modes of self-evaluation (and implicitly conceptions of self as language learner) that are congruent with the learner's conceptions of the situational context of learning.

Summary

In Part Two of this monograph, we have attempted to describe and classify statements about language learning made by the learners in our study under the headings of beliefs about language learning, beliefs about situational context and beliefs about self.

Under the heading of beliefs about language learning, we noted the importance attached to work as a factor in successful language learning. We also noted that the learners in our study expressed a range of conceptions of language learning that can be described along a continuum from quantitative to qualitative. We pointed to evidence that qualitative conceptions of language learning may indicate greater readiness for autonomy, but at the same time observed that the capacity to shift towards more qualitative conceptions may be the more important factor.

Under the heading of beliefs about situational context, we observed a prevalent belief among the students in our study that they had reached a stage in their learning of English at which increased effort yields declining returns such that further learning efforts become burdensome. We also observed that this conception of the situational context of learning interacts differently with quantitative and qualitative conceptions of language and language learning. In conjunction with a quantitative conception of learning, it is likely to lead to demoralisation and a reluctance to engage in autonomous learning. On the other hand, a shift towards qualitative conceptions of learning was seen as a possible way out of the dilemma of the declining return on effort.

Under the heading of beliefs about self, we observed that learners tended to evaluate themselves and their English either in quantitative or qualitative terms. We suggested that, in conjunction with a conception of the situational context as one in which increased effort yields declining returns, quantitative self-evaluations are likely to be less positive than qualitative self-evaluations. Readiness for autonomy was identified with readiness to shift from quantitative to qualitative modes of self-evaluation.

The analysis offered here is essentially an exercise in breaking up and reconstituting a collective body of knowledge about language learning shared among one group of learners. An important point to emerge is that beliefs about language learning, situational context and self are not independent of each other. They are tied together by underlying conceptions of the nature of the object and process of learning. Moreover, beliefs about what it takes to learn a language and beliefs about oneself as a language learner can only be interpreted in conjunction with beliefs about situational context. Although beliefs associated with qualitative conceptions of learning appear to be most indicative of readiness for autonomy, equally important is the congruence of beliefs about language learning and self with beliefs about situational context and the readiness to shift towards more congruent beliefs when the occasion arises.

Part Three

Conceptions of language learning and learner discourse - two case studies

We have so far discussed what learners say about language learning without taking into account who said what and in what contexts. The purpose of this has been to identify the range of beliefs and conceptions expressed within our data. This approach is characteristic of research in the fields of learner beliefs about language learning and conceptions of learning discussed in Part One. However, we have also suggested that it is important to examine the expression of beliefs and conceptions in the context of learner discourse rather than as transparent reflections of thought. This calls for a consideration not only of the beliefs and conceptions held by individuals but also of the ways in which the expression of these beliefs and conceptions function in discourse. In Part Three of this report, we will attempt to show how the different beliefs and conceptions identified in Part Two interact in the discourse of two individual learners, whom we will call Icy and Angel.

Icy

Among the 16 students in the Arts Faculty class observed in this study, Icy was the most active and talkative. She frequently took the lead in classroom discussions and sometimes complained in interviews that her fellow students did not speak up in class. Icy reports that she enjoys learning languages, and in her first year of university she followed Japanese and French voluntary courses. She was also working part-time as a private English language tutor for lower-form secondary students, a job that many students take on to supplement their incomes. As the extracts quoted from her interviews below show, Icy talks articulately about language learning and expresses strong views that remain consistent over the period of the interviews. The extracts cited below are taken from three long interviews conducted in the first and second semesters of Icy's first year at university and in the first semester of her second year.

Readiness for autonomy

When asked what she thought of the idea of self-access learning early in her first year, Icy says:

> "I think it's necessary. From the moment you can think, learning actually relies on yourself."

In a later interview, she explicitly states a preference for autonomous learning:

> "I always think that learning to me is 'don't force me'. I don't like to be forced, for example, to do homework, to memorise things, something like that. If I want to learn something, I will take an initiative to do something."

Similarly, in her report on the ILP, she writes:

> "About self-study, I think it's vitally important for everyone learning, especially learning language. I haven't taken any additional tutorial class before because I believe in self-study and I want to be more independent. Self-study means we have to access the materials actively and to motivate ourselves to

> learn and practise. The ILP does not change my views on self-study because it's what I have been, but I do think this project can make us more self-motivated."

Icy thus displays a consistently positive attitude towards autonomous learning at all stages of the ILP, although we will see that she is also critical of the project. Our objective in this case study is to understand what the basis for this positive attitude to autonomy consists of. We discuss this under the headings of beliefs about language learning, situational context and self introduced in Part Two of this report.

Beliefs about language learning

In interviews, Icy talked at length about what she believes to be the best way of learning languages. She says that she is guided by explicit principles of language learning, which she supports with accounts of her own experiences. The following extract from an interview conducted early in her second year of university study is quoted at length because it gives an impression of her talk and also illustrates one aspect of her beliefs about language learning. Icy is responding to a question about whether her ways of studying other languages can be also applied to studying English:

> "They can be almost the same because I am now studying French and have stopped studying Japanese although I've learnt it before. I think that learning a new language... I always ask myself what learning well means. It means simply speaking, being able to listen, write and pronounce, these three things; and able to read, these four things. That is, I always ask myself how I can achieve these four aims if I want to learn it well. Then I think that, when I look back at, for example, French, Japanese and English, simply speaking, you must know the vocabulary. But vocabulary needs to be built up through constant reading. If you don't know the vocabulary, it's useless because it's a tool in a language. You must know the vocabulary first. In no way, you have to be hard-working, that is you know it through much contact. Then what you have to do is know the grammar. No matter what language it is, every language has its own grammar. The grammar of each language may be different. For example, tense is seldom mentioned in the Chinese language, but in English, French and Japanese there is tense for verbs. There are many different kinds of tenses. You need to have a clear mind to learn, to remember the structure, how each tense changes and other things like grammar. Then when you listen... when you write, besides grammar and vocabulary, you have to learn organisation and, maybe there are many things to write and you have to do some application. You have to learn such things by yourself through many writings. Then in the aspect of speaking, you have to learn pronunciation. You have to learn the basic pronunciation whatever the language is. Then when you see a word, you know how it, or how it is spelled phonetically and gradually you know how to pronounce it. Pronunciation, reading, writing... writing has been mentioned. Listening, listening... I

> think the basic thing is you have to know the vocabulary. Once you know it, you know... you can listen..., because when you listen, you can't catch so many things. You need to rely on keywords. If you know the vocabulary and remember how they are pronounced, then when people say the keywords, you can guess. Then you depend on the vocabulary. I always remind myself of using these methods when learning a language."

The substance of this extract is framed by two statements indicating that Icy's language learning is guided by explicit principles ('I always ask myself what learning well means... I always remind myself of using these methods when learning a language'). Later in the interview, Icy says that her 'logic of learning languages' comes from her experience of learning English and Chinese and that it is important for her to use this logic because she knows 'what is important' and what she has 'to do first'.

This logic of learning a new language is based on a 'four skills' approach, within which vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation are identified as being especially important. This division of language and language learning in its component parts is indicative of a quantitative conception. Her emphasis on vocabulary also appears to indicate a quantitative conception of language as being made up of words. However, the methods of building vocabulary that she favours are not necessarily quantitative in their implications. She suggests, for example, that vocabulary needs to be built up by 'constant reading' (a qualitative approach) rather than memorisation (a quantitative approach). Indeed, Icy states on several occasions that she is not good at memorisation. In an earlier interview, Icy reports using two vocabulary learning strategies: looking up unfamiliar words heard in films and keeping vocabulary notebooks. At the end of her account, however, she says:

> "Sometimes when I clean my house, I find that I've kept so many [vocabulary books]. And I'd wonder if it's necessary to throw away some of them. I think, if I don't know the words, I can just look them up. But I don't know why. I just feel that it's better to write them down."

Keeping vocabulary notebooks is indicative of a quantitative conception of language learning, but it is interesting to note here how Icy's retrospection on the books that she finds in her house brings out her doubts about the appropriateness of this approach and the conception on which it is based to her current stage of learning.

On other occasions Icy describes methods of learning that are clearly based on a qualitative conception of language and language learning, for example:

> "Studying language, it's based on your attention in your daily living. Erm, it's a kind of sense. If you've got that kind of sense, no matter who speaks a sentence, or if you notice any word you don't know in the street, you will have the initiative to learn it."

This conception of language learning is based around the English words 'sense' and 'initiative' and the idea that it is better not to study English deliberately:

> "For example, when I learn English, now I won't deliberately open the grammar book and memorise all the things. On the contrary, when I am free, I may read the South China Morning Post to see the English, such as 'bid a piece of land' means put in a tender for land. But you won't deliberately look up 'bid' in the dictionary and then memorise all its meanings. It's a lively method. You see the things around you. Whenever you see something you don't know, you will be sensitive to remember it and you will ask others."

In this extract, the intuitive method based on 'attention in daily living' is contrasted with memorisation, but the example that she gives also illustrates how her interpretation of this method builds upon her conception of the importance of vocabulary. Other accounts of her learning experiences follow a similar pattern. For example, she describes how, having heard the word 'moo' in a film, she was able to look it up in the dictionary and "felt happy because it's after my hard work". In other account, Icy describes how she learned a new word while attending a workshop:

> "... that kind of board, flipping here and there, I didn't know how to express it and I would start to think about, if in English, how to express it. But people would say, 'now let's look at the flip chart'. What is 'flip chart'? So get back home and check the meaning. So now I learnt the word. It's good. So not with any special method, just always be aware."

This extract also suggests that her method, which she sees as being not 'any special method' also has a motivational element since it is based on her interest and produces a feeling of 'happiness' when she is successful in learning.

Icy thus appears to draw concurrently on two conceptions of language and language learning, one primarily quantitative (based on the four skills and vocabulary building), the other primarily qualitative (based on understanding, attention to English in daily life and initiative in learning). It seems likely that the first of these conceptions has survived from an earlier stage of her learning and it is interesting that she sees it as especially relevant both to her own efforts to learn new languages and to her tutoring of younger students. The second conception, which is more strongly indicative of her readiness for autonomous learning, appears to have been adopted later in her learning. This second conception appears to build upon and absorb elements of the first, suggesting that an important factor in Icy's readiness for autonomy is her capacity to shift from one conception to the other by manipulating experiences and conceptions in discourse, a skill that is evident in the extracts quoted above.

Beliefs about situational context

In contrast to many of the students interviewed in this study, Icy is in no doubt about the importance of English, stating that it is "impossible not knowing English", that having good English means you will be "multi-talented" and that no matter what career you are going to pursue, English will be helpful. Since Icy has reached a point where her formal study of English language is coming to an end, this recognition of the importance of English in her later life is perhaps a prerequisite for a positive attitude towards autonomous learning of English.

Two other factors in Icy's beliefs about the situational context of her learning also appear to be important. First, like many other students, Icy is aware of the demands of other studies in relation to the time she is prepared to expend on English. Having suggested that she needs to revise earlier learning, Icy was asked why she did not do that:

> "Because I think there are many other things more important than this to be done first. For example, you need to hand in assignments, prepare tutorials, and you have exams. And now I'm taking two other languages. They are voluntary. Whenever, there's any free time, I have to work on French and Japanese. I always think that if I have time in summer, I will strengthen my own English, the basic knowledge. But there's always unfinished business... In fact it's absolutely possible and it's very reasonable to do it. But the point is I myself don't have time, very busy."

Icy finds it difficult to find time for English, but her part time work as a private tutor for lower form secondary school students counteracts this:

> "As I do private tutoring, so I will read books again. Too bad I do not know what agreement is. In fact, I knew that, but didn't know this kind of grammar is called agreement. So, I have to read this kind of thing in order to teach people."

We have noted that the learners in our study have two possible responses to this kind of pressure. They may become demoralised as a result of their awareness of the declining return on their English learning efforts, or they may shift towards more implicit methods of learning based on qualitative conceptions of language learning. Icy does appear to be shifting towards more implicit methods of learning, but at the same time she does not seem to be aware of a declining return on her more explicit methods of learning grammar and vocabulary. From her point of view, the problem is not that they are ineffective but simply that doesn't have time for them. Her work as an English tutor (and her need to learn French and Japanese *ab initio*) appear to sustain quantitative conceptions of learning, but do not prevent her from shifting to qualitative conceptions at the same time.

Second, Icy's accounts of her prior experience of language learning in school tend to revolve around a key experience with one A-Level English Literature teacher. In one interview, she gives a detailed description of the methods of this teacher who 'directed her how to self-learn'. She comments that the teacher showed her how the

syllabus and examination marking schemes worked, asked the students to read novels and gave them vocabulary, watched films with the students, gave advice on how to watch a film and welcomed students to see him outside class. She describes this teacher as inspiring her and helping her to enter university. Icy's main criticism of the ILP concerned a workshop that she had attended on learning English through film, which leads to a modification of her statement that 'learning relies on yourself':

> "I think it's necessary. From the moment you can think, learning actually depends on yourself. But I am a bit disappointed when I signed up for the film workshop, we sat together and he always asked us what we expect. Well, we just think that he would teach us, teach us for example how to appreciate while watching a film, what special terms, jargons are useful. Guide us. But the introductory [workshop] just let you do what you want… I myself always read books, but I still need something to guide me. I myself think that, that is good at least, something pushes me."

In criticising the workshop, Icy draws on her experience with her A-level teacher. More generally, her account of this teacher's methods underpins a conception of 'guidance', which involves support, inspiration and teaching students techniques that they can apply in their own learning. Earlier, we associated the belief that you need to be taught English by a teacher with quantitative conceptions of language and language learning because there is an underlying assumption that the teacher is in possession of the 'things' of which English is composed. However, it is clear from our data that even students who believe that 'learning actually depends on yourself' sustain a role for teachers of English in autonomous learning. Icy's account is interesting, not only because she has been able to redefine the role of the teacher in her learning as that of a 'guide', but also because of the way in which she is able to draw on her experiences in order to construct this role in discourse.

Beliefs about self

Interviewed in her second year of university study, Icy was asked what makes her want to continue learning English now:

> "Because I think [my English is] not good enough. That is, maybe as you see more, you will think it is not good enough. For example, sometimes… I am a private tutor, mainly teaching English. Sometimes the student asks me something about the reader or books of a form two student. I sometimes may see some difficult words suddenly which I haven't seen before and become dumb. I then feel that there are many things I don't know. When I read the newspaper, I find I still don't know a lot of words. Therefore, I want to continue learning more words. Sometimes when I write an essay, I ask myself whether I should add an 's' there and whether the tense I use there is the most appropriate. Sometimes I need to think about it and hesitate. That is I think I do not write as I want.

> Also sometimes when I do a presentation, if I am not well prepared, cannot say what I think at that moment or my mental condition is not good, I may not speak fluently or use a wrong tense. I think my English is not perfect and I must continue learning it well."

In this extract, Icy once again answers at length, drawing on her beliefs about language learning and the situational context of her learning. Initially, she describes her proficiency in English in relation to inadequacies she has noted in her work as a tutor. She then describes examples of her weaknesses in relation to three of the four skills that she has identified as important, focussing especially on weaknesses in vocabulary and grammar. In this extract, therefore, there is a close relationship between her assessment of her own proficiency and the quantitative aspect of her conception of language learning. In an interview recorded almost a year earlier she adopts a very similar pattern of self-evaluation, saying that in speaking, she feels she is not bold enough, that she does not speak smoothly and that she is afraid of making mistakes. In writing, she is concerned that she is not sure if she is using grammar correctly and in listening, her concern is that she cannot always concentrate hard enough. She concludes this self-assessment by saying that her English is 'not up to the standard'.

Icy also describes her proficiency in a more general way, however, saying that the standard she is aiming at is to be able to "speak English in the same way as I speak Cantonese, very natural and without any hesitation" and also to be "confident" and "write without lengthy consideration of whether the writing is good enough". Asked whether she has an individual in mind as a model for spoken English, she says that she would like to speak like "those who have Cantonese as the mother tongue but can speak English in such a way that they seem not to know Cantonese".

We have observed two ways of evaluating one's own proficiency in a language, one quantitative and the other qualitative. Icy's account is interesting because it makes use of both types of self-assessment. In relation to her reading, for example, the problem is that she doesn't know 'a lot of words' and that she needs to learn 'more words'. She also uses a notion of 'perfect' English. However, when pressed to explain at what point her English would be so perfect that she would be satisfied, Icy uses the phrase 'my so-called perfect' and shifts towards comparisons with fluent Chinese speakers of English. Finally she says that, "I think perhaps what I mean by so-called perfect is I can grasp everything". In the course of her interviews, Icy is as articulate about her proficiency in English as she is about her conceptions of learning. We believe that her ability to shift from one conception of proficiency to another and her more general ability to manipulate different conceptions of proficiency discursively is an important element in her readiness for autonomy.

A final element in Icy's conception of herself is the idea that she is not hard-working. We have noted that the belief that hard work is the most important factor in learning a language is prevalent in our data. This notion is strikingly absent from Icy's talk. Although it is clear

from our observations of her that she is no less hard working than her peers, she describes herself as 'lazy'. She also points out on several occasions that she is not good at memorising. This conception that laziness and inability to memorise are her weaknesses undoubtedly influences her preference for intuitive methods of learning. It also appears to be motivating because Icy believes that she has been successful in examinations despite them:

> "I passed through the HKCEE without seriousness but in fact how is my actual strength? How much do I know? I think that such an attitude towards studying is not appropriate and so I have to be more hard-working."

In taking this attitude, Icy is again influenced by her A-level English Literature teacher who told her students:

> "Don't think that I suddenly know many words and how to write English. In fact I consciously employ this literary language. You won't know it suddenly. You have to read the other's language and bear it in mind. Then you deliberately use it. When using it wrongly, you find out why. You then know it."

For Icy, this teacher is "talented but she still has such a heart of learning". She clearly represents for Icy a model of learning that allows to set her own targets independently of institutional criteria of success.

Summary

It is evident that there are a number of factors in Icy's approaches to and beliefs about language learning that favourably dispose her towards the idea of autonomous learning. She enjoys studying languages and thinks learning English is important independently of institutional requirements. She employs learning strategies based on clearly formulated beliefs and she is able to create new learning situations from her contact with English in her daily life. She is also able to evaluate herself as a language learner independently of institutional criteria. Many of these factors are associated with the adoption of a qualitative conception of language learning. The interesting aspect of Icy's talk, however, is that it does not simply manifest a qualitative conception of language. She appears simultaneously to hold both quantitative and qualitative conceptions. In the light of this, the most significant feature of her discourse appears to be the capacity she displays to build qualitative conceptions from quantitative conceptions. This is most evident in the way that she conceptualises a new role for the teacher as a guide in autonomous learning. In brief, Icy is able to reconcile two apparently contradictory conceptions of roles in language learning that belong to the quantitative and qualitative domains - that the teacher teaches what the learner learns and that learning depends on the learner herself - into her own conception of the teacher as a guide. Moreover, she develops this conception of roles dialogically by making sense of her past and current experiences through discourse. This ability to evolve and internalise new conceptions of learning discursively may be the most significant factor in her readiness for autonomous learning.

Angel

In contrast to Icy, Angel was not a particularly active or talkative member of her group. In the early part of the year we observed that she lacked confidence in speaking English in class, often checking with a friend before she spoke up. In the later part of the year, however, she became more confident and in interviews recorded in the latter part of the year and in her second year, she spoke articulately about language learning. However, as the extracts quoted below show, her speech is characterised by hesitations, reformulations and a good deal of online processing of her ideas. In contrast to Icy's interviews, Angel's are difficult to characterise in terms of beliefs about language learning, situational context and self as the three are often intertwined in complex ways. The extracts cited below are taken from two long interviews conducted in the second semester of Angel's first year and the first semester of her second year at university.

Autonomy

In her written report on the ILP, Angel expresses a clear preference for autonomous learning based upon a conception of English as a language with 'no specified curriculum':

> "English is a language which has no specified curriculum and thus it is difficult to learn it well within class. I always think that self-study is a very important and practical way to improve one's English because it provides chances for us to keep in

> touch with the language even outside class. This type of learning is often more flexible and interesting."

She also expresses a positive attitude to autonomy in interviews, stating that it is a 'a new feeling'. At the same time, however, she expresses a number of doubts:

> "On the one hand, there's not much pressure. But if there's not much initiation, just based on oneself, when it comes to the last moment, I'm afraid it can't be finished. A lot of burden, you might feel. In fact, you need to plan it very early. On the one hand I enjoy the atmosphere. The learning atmosphere is good. But if really, really, if really independent, or maybe I didn't have this kind of experience, it was a mess when it started."

In another extract, Angel again describes the feeling of autonomous learning in the ILP as 'good' but expresses doubts about whether she was learning or not:

> "At that time, my feeling was good. I found I myself doing my own things. I think I could learn something in it. I think the feeling was good. [But] somehow I would think, independent learning, I didn't know what I had learned. So I didn't want to waste my time."

At the end of the ILP, Angel expresses some disappointment about her own experience of autonomous learning, for which she partly blames herself:

> "I expected at least for independent learning, the sense of achievement should be greater. At least you would feel very independent, no matter whether people appreciate it or not. You yourself could still think that you did something. But now, I blame myself that I didn't do many things. It might be because I chose Writing at Work. I revised all the business letters, correspondence. But nothing really satisfied me very much. At first, I expected that independent learning can lead me to have some achievement. Or don't say it's achievement. Doing all the exercises, workbooks, oh this process is called independent learning. Maybe the result wasn't as much as I expected. I want to have more."

Angel clearly thought that autonomous learning of English was a good idea, but found herself unprepared for it at the beginning of the year. Her experience of autonomous learning also left her with a feeling of dissatisfaction. Her experience of the ILP was, therefore, much more directly an experience of coming to terms with an unfamiliar way of learning.

Beliefs about language learning

Angel's idea that English has 'no specified curriculum' represents an explicitly qualitative conception of language, and, as we saw in the extract quoted at the beginning of the previous section, this conception is at the root of her feeling that autonomous learning is a good idea. Her descriptions of her learning methods are also based on qualitative conceptions of learning, as in the following accounts of how she improves her writing:

> "Er I think that as you read more in English, you will absorb the writing style of the author unconsciously more and more easily. That is you are not conscious of that. You do not aim at learning his writing style or writing it down deliberately, but I think that er you, you will, that is, when you write something, you may suddenly say, 'Oh I seem to think of a word I can use'. Then you write it out. Or I may think that it is not good to follow the writing style of another person, but I also find the essay comfortable to read and the organisation is OK when I use this writing style. Then I may er ,that is, use a little bit of it. So I think I can make an improvement unconsciously in this way."

In several similar extracts, Angel describes learning as a process of 'absorption' that takes place 'unconsciously'. She also emphasises that she does not learn English 'deliberately'. In one interview, Angel explains how she uses the newspaper to learn English:

> "... because er recently er because my elder sister always reads, she has just come back to Hong Kong and she likes reading newspaper. After she reads the newspaper and just leaves it alone, I think that it is wasted. So sometimes for no reason I wait for a time when I have no revision and nothing else to do. I then read the English newspaper, because in the past I seldom did so as I had to buy it myself. At least I was lazy to do such kind of thing and so got no benefit from doing so. But now someone buys the newspaper for you and you think it is wasted if you don't read it. So you read it. No matter what it is, such as politics and entertainment news, or sports, I am interested in reading all of them. That means when I think, 'Ah this topic is quite interesting', I will read it. In the past, I would forget it when I found one or two articles useless. But now, I think er as I read it, 'why don't I read more of it?'"

In this extract, Angel is contrasting her current opportunistic method of reading the newspaper because she has 'nothing else to do' with her previous method (strongly encouraged in Hong Kong schools) of reading the newspaper in order to improve her English. From Angel's point of view, she learns less when she is explicitly trying to learn English than when she simply follows her own interests within an English language environment.

Angel displays a radically qualitative conception of learning in relation to both the object and process of learning. Her doubts emerge only when she discusses roles in learning. Describing the ILP, she states:

> "I think at first there should be a schedule. If not, not knowing what to do. Perhaps I didn't have that kind of experience, so I didn't put much effort into it. I used to follow guidance from teachers. So you need to have your own schedule. In fact, you really need to have a concrete aim. Otherwise it's too loose to start out, and you won't know how to carry it out and don't know what's enough. You need to allocate your time and don't do everything all in one day. Not to do it intensively at the end. From time to time, the tutor could ask you about your progress and see what kind of help, resources. Sometimes, even if you are lazy and forget to do it, the teacher would make you do it. And you will do it. And then, finally, you should do a small project, an issue, a subject, or something. Or you should present something for just a few minutes. So the process is that you yourself plan. You yourself allocate the time. You yourself really carry it out. When it comes out, everyone will comment on your work. Ah, when people say 'that's not okay' or when they appreciate, I would know if it's right. That's the evaluation for myself."

In this extract, Angel points to a need for structure in her autonomous learning. She would like to have a 'schedule', a 'concrete aim' and a definite outcome. She would also like to have a tutor check on her 'progress' and 'make her do it' when she is lazy. Her suggestions are built around a concern that she does not know what she is learning in autonomous learning. They hint at a view of agency in which the teacher plays a more directive role than might be expected given her overall qualitative conception of language and language learning. However, like Icy her solution to the problem is to construct through her discourse a role for the teacher as a guide who intervenes 'from time to time', but does not necessarily teach or evaluate.

Beliefs about situational context

Like Icy, Angel believes that English is important for her future life:

> "... because English seems to be an international language, I think that, er... how to say? There seems to be er some pressure. That is, it seems that you must learn it well, you should learn it well, you should do so, because everyone thinks that, er, it is urgent, important, a need, whatever you are now studying, working, er it seems to be very necessary. English is needed. So it turns out that, er, it seems that whether one learns it well is emphasised. That means you will make more effort to learn it."

This belief gives her a motive for autonomous learning. However, unlike Icy, she reports that she has no experience of autonomous learning before arriving at university. When asked what she thinks of the process of autonomous learning, she says:

> "Perhaps I didn't have that kind of experience, so I didn't put much effort into it. I used to follow guidance from teachers."

As we saw, in the longer extract quoted at the end of the previous section, this feeling that she had no experience of autonomous learning to draw on underpins her view that the ILP would have been better for her if it had been more structured and teacher-guided. It also appears to influence her evaluation of her language learning at school:

> "In fact, in school, it's more systematic for the foundation, especially for junior forms. If at that time they ask you to have independent learning, you wouldn't know how to do it as you did not have the basics. You wouldn't know how to learn. At least you need to know how to read, how to improve. I know that many things are based on your weakness. For example, in school, not everyone has the same needs. It's difficult to ask the teacher. For instance, you say 'My grammar is no good and you [teacher] teach me grammar.' However, some of them might not need it. It is not very fair to other students. So, when you really have a certain foundation, and find out your weakness, in fact, that can really help yourself."

Lacking experience of autonomy in the school context, Angel appears to argue that a quantitative conception of language learning, building a 'foundation', is appropriate to the early stages of language learning but less appropriate to the later stages. For her, building a foundation is a prerequisite for moving on to more implicit methods of learning. Thus, like Icy, Angel does not discard earlier quantitative conceptions of learning, but builds them into a qualitative conception of the learning process as a process of personal change.

Unlike other students interviewed, Angel does not refer to the pressure of other subjects or to the declining return on her learning efforts. This is related in part to the way in which she conceptualises the situational context of learning itself. Angel frequently refers to situations in which she finds herself uncertain or confused. For example, when asked whether there is any particular reason why she wants to learn English, she says:

> "Er sometimes when I go to school, I won't think of such a thing. Not immediately. Er, for example sometimes when you have a lecture and are daydreaming, you may think, 'Oh my God, what is he talking about?'. I don't think of the book. 'Why don't I understand what he is saying? Is the book difficult or am I incapable?' I think, does 'incapable' mean my language ability is not up to his standard and so I don't understand him? That means maybe my interpretation ability is weak, or perhaps er even if I do the reading or preparation for reading, I think I still don't understand what he says. Perhaps these two things of mine are weak. Sometimes I have such a thought, even when I am daydreaming. Sometimes I ask myself 'Why is my English skill so weak?' I may ask myself in that way. But I will not urge myself to learn it well. I won't."

In this extract, Angel conceptualises the situational context of learning as an environment in which she is exposed to English and does not always understand. The way in which she conceptualises the situational

context thus directly supports a qualitative conception of language learning. It also leads to her particular way of talking about learning English, in which problems are raised and developed as she talks and often left unresolved. In this case, for example, Angel does not respond to the problem she has raised by saying that she needs to improve her listening skills. She simply acknowledges the possibility that her English is weak and that she does not 'urge herself' to improve. At the same time, Angel frequently reports that problems of this kind resolve themselves over time. When asked what she has learned from her first year English course, for example, she says:

> "If you say that I really have learned many things, I don't think so. In fact, I think I don't really learn many things. But in the past, I didn't know what an academic essay was. I was quite confused. I was always wondering if it's the issue being academic. Then I started to know that it's the method. It's the writing style or writing skill to make it more academic."

Angel conceptualises the situational context of her learning at the beginning of the year as one in which she was faced with the demand to write 'academic essays' without knowing what they were. She then reports that her confusion was resolved by a reconceptualisation of the problem - it was not a matter of the 'issue being academic' but of the way of writing about it. Angel also reports that she has not 'learned many things'. Thus when she views the situational context quantitatively as one in which she is expecting to learn 'things' she believes that she has not learned much. But when she views the situation qualitatively, she believes that she has learned something. Moreover, what she has learned would be considered highly significant in the context of the goals of the course she was following.

This extract is especially interesting for two reasons. First, it reveals how the way in which the situational context of learning is conceptualised is related to conceptions of the object and process of learning. Second, it shows how Angel puts quantitative and qualitative conceptions to use in discourse as part of the process of making sense of her learning. We have suggested that Angel's conceptions of language and language learning are radically qualitative but that she has some doubts about what she is learning in autonomous learning. In this extract, we can see both how these doubts are related to a residual quantitative conception of the learning context and how she is able to move towards a provisional resolution of them through discourse.

Beliefs about self

In Angel's evaluations of herself as a language learner, the same themes emerge that are present in her beliefs about language learning and the situational context of learning. She frequently describes herself as 'lazy' in regard to learning English and, as we have noted earlier, often states that she does not push herself to improve when she encounters problems. We have also noted that she expresses doubts about whether she is learning anything in autonomous learning, which may be connected to the fact that she adopts two modes of assessing her improvement in English. These two modes are illustrated in the following extract, in which she first of all talks about watching movies so that she can become familiar with different accents of English:

> "Erm, I, I feel that gradually, because I'm interested, interest, gradually, I don't know if I have improved but when I listen to it, I can stay calm. Before I was nervous as I didn't know what accent it was. If I am calm, actually I can understand. For writing skills, sometimes [the essay] is very long and complicated. If I read it again, it's actually not a big deal. It just makes itself complicated. I don't know if it's an improvement. But the interest is more."

Assessing her improvement in listening, she says first that she does not know if she has improved and then that she finds that she has become calmer and can understand. Assessing her improvement in writing, she says that by re-reading texts she is able to come to grips with writing styles that initially appear difficult, but again states that she doesn't know if that is an improvement. It seems likely that when Angel thinks of 'improvement', she is operating with a quantitative conception of learning, which would allow her to measure improvement in quantitative terms. However, when she operates with a qualitative conception, she is usually able to describe some qualitative change in her English.

This concurrent use of quantitative and qualitative modes of self-assessment is also apparent in the way in which she describes her work in the ILP. For the ILP, Angel attended a workshop on Writing at Work and spent her time doing exercises from books on resumes and business writing and on revising some of her secondary school work. In her written report she states:

> "Though I have not learnt many new things [about business letters], I have got used to their formats and styles.... Particularly, I have become more confident in producing my own resume and writing it efficiently".

Her self-evaluation follows the familiar pattern, in which she states that although she has not learned many 'new things' (a quantitative gain), she has become more confident (a qualitative change). As we observed earlier, Angel was not entirely satisfied with the ILP or her experience of autonomous learning:

> "At first, I expected that independent learning can lead me to have some achievement. Or don't say it's achievement. Doing all the exercises, workbooks, oh this process is called independent learning. Maybe the result wasn't as much as I expected. I want to have more."

It is evident that this dissatisfaction arises in part from the struggle between quantitative and qualitative conceptions of learning in Angel's discourse on language and language learning. Her proposal that the ILP should involve more structure and guidance in part arises from her need to reconcile these conceptions by having her own qualitative assessments validated by others.

Summary

At the beginning of this section, we described Angel as having a positive attitude towards autonomy, but we also noted that she had doubts about the value of her experience of autonomous learning. Her readiness for autonomy is clearly related to her radically qualitative conception of language and language learning. She believes that English has 'no specified curriculum' and she is committed to implicit methods of learning. We have also observed that Angel is able to describe qualitative changes in her English, but that she is, at the same time, beset by doubts that these changes are really 'improvements'. We have suggested that these doubts arise from residual quantitative conceptions of learning which are manifested in her implicit assumption that improvements should be measurable rather than describable. Angel's discourse on language learning, therefore, contains elements of quantitative and qualitative conceptions that she is constantly attempting to resolve. What is striking about Angel's discourse, however, is that despite her doubts, she is prepared to open herself to new ways of learning and engage in dialogue about them. Thus, it may well be that Angel's readiness for autonomy lies less in her adoption of qualitative conceptions of learning, than in her willingness to engage in dialogue and resolve doubts about these conceptions discursively.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this monograph, we raised two questions: What conceptions of language and language learning do learners hold and how are these conceptions related to their readiness for autonomous learning? Behind these questions lay an implicit assumption that learning behaviours are conditioned by overarching conceptions of the object and process of learning. In the literature on language learning, researchers often take for granted that we all share the same view of what languages are and what learning them consists of. In proposing that certain learning behaviours are more effective than others, however, we may be in danger of neglecting the fact that learners have their own views on these matters, which are likely to influence the degree to which they are prepared to adopt the behaviours we propose. In this monograph, we have been discussing learners' responses to the idea of autonomous learning. Our assumption has been that certain conceptions of language and language learning are likely to be more congruent with the idea and practice of autonomous learning than others.

We have approached these issues by attempting to analyse the discourse of a small group of learners talking and writing about their learning in the context of a programme intending to promote autonomous language learning. We have looked at what they say about language learning and attempted to relate these statements to their readiness for autonomy. Our main conclusion must be that the relationships that we are attempting to make sense of do not yield easy answers. For analytical purposes, we have broadly classified learner beliefs into categories of beliefs about language learning, beliefs about situational context and beliefs about self. We have also related beliefs across these categories to conceptions of language and language learning that we term quantitative and qualitative. We broadly conclude that qualitative conceptions are more congruent with the idea of autonomous learning than quantitative conceptions. If learners broadly adopt the view that languages consist of things to be learned and approach the task of learning as the accumulation of those things, they are less likely to respond positively to autonomy. If they adopt the view that language is an unfamiliar environment with which they must come to terms and approach the task of learning as one of exposure, understanding and personal adaptation, they are more likely to respond positively to autonomy. This is simply to say that autonomous learning makes more sense and has more to offer to learners who adopt qualitative conceptions than to those who adopt quantitative conceptions.

The two case studies presented in Part Three of this monograph suggest, however, that learners do not simply hold to a consistent set of beliefs underpinned by a single coherent conception of language learning. In the two cases discussed, the learners were observed to draw on both quantitative and qualitative conceptions of learning. Moreover, these apparently contradictory conceptions of learning were seen to be grounded in complex relationships between beliefs about language learning, situational context and self. This leads us to the conclusion that what we should be looking at when we observe learner discourse on language learning is not so much the transparent

representation of coherent sets of beliefs but the structure of the discourse itself. Rather than attempt to infer learners' beliefs and conceptions of learning from this discourse, we should analyse how beliefs and conceptions are put to work against each other in discourse in ways which allow learners to come to terms with the idea of autonomy. Learners' willingness and capacity to engage in dialogue around conceptions of learning may well be a much stronger indicator of their readiness for autonomous learning than the beliefs or conceptions that they are observed to hold at any particular moment in time.

Although our main aim in this monograph has been to understand relationships between conceptions of language learning and autonomy, we may also draw some conclusions for practice. Our research suggests that it is important to recognise that learners do not come to autonomous learning as blank sheets of paper on which the idea and practice of autonomous learning is to be written. When faced with an intervention designed to encourage them to become more autonomous, learners mobilise beliefs about what languages and language learning are. These beliefs influence not only their readiness for autonomy but also the ways in which they make sense of the concept in practice. The data that we have analysed in this monograph shows that this is essentially a process of reflection on the nature of language and language learning as a whole, which can be understood in the Vygotskyan sense as a social process of internalisation of external communicative speech as inner speech. Earlier we identified three main strands of implementation of autonomy: training in learning strategies, allowing students greater freedom and control over the learning process and provision of facilities and opportunities for self-directed learning. To these we may add the importance of dialogue about learners' beliefs and conceptions of language and language learning.

Our experience suggests that it is especially important to create opportunities for learners to share their experiences and opinions on language learning, to ask students what kind of guidance they are comfortable with in autonomous learning and to try to give it to them, and to keep in mind that autonomy is about becoming 'more autonomous' in ways that make sense to learners themselves. In this sense, the kind of research that we have engaged in, which essentially consists of listening to learners talk about language learning, can also be part of the practice of promoting autonomy.

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